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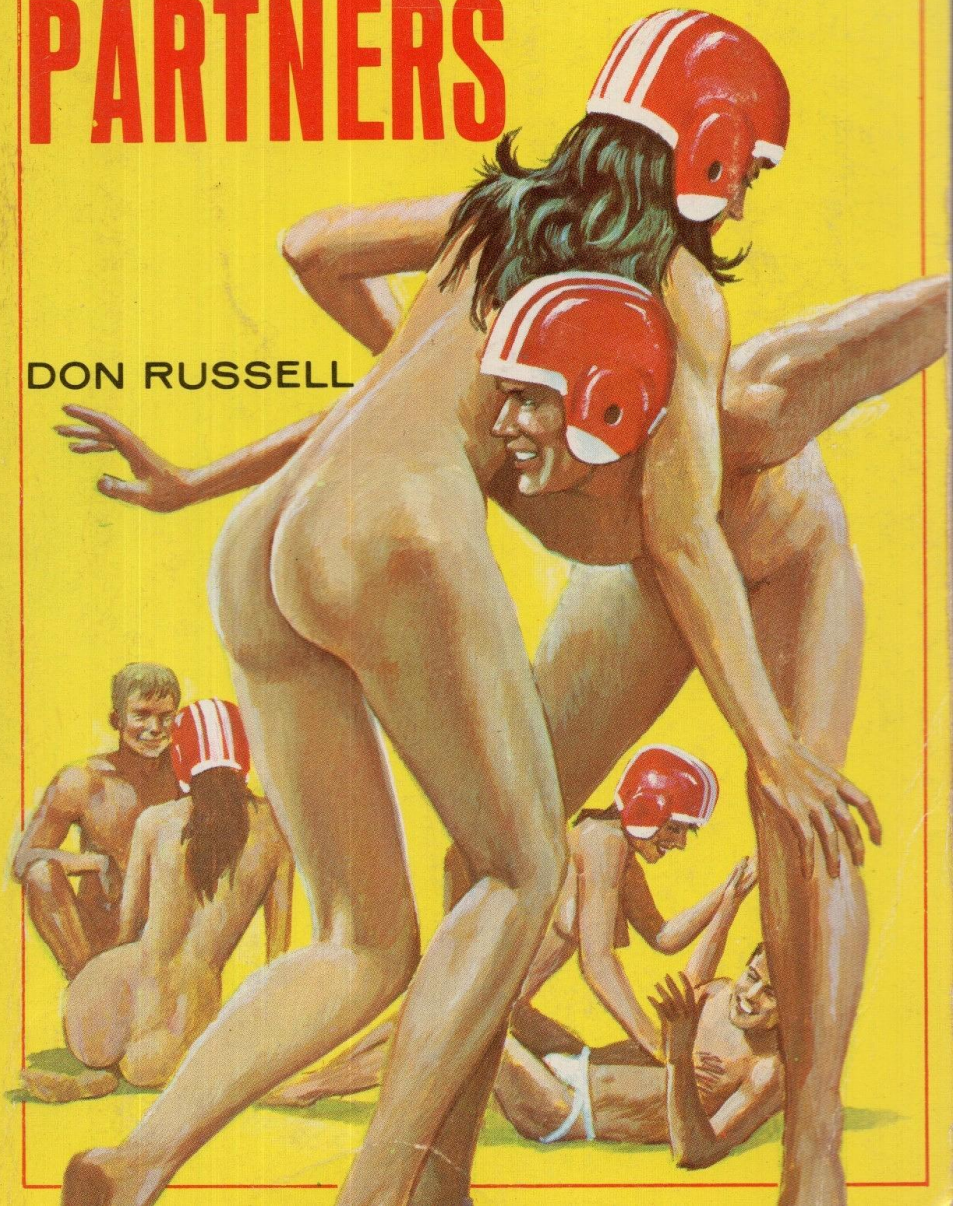
FIRST DOWN AND AND SEX TO GO!

PLAY-OFF PARTNERS

DON RUSSELL



Don Russell

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Chapter 1

TED BROWN WATCHED HIS BOYS RACE for the snack bar, their cleats kicking up chunks of muddy earth, the colors of their uniforms obliterated by layers of wet dirt, their helmets swinging in their hands. He glanced around the bench for forgotten kicking tees or mouth-guards, shouldered the equipment bag and turned his back on the field. Rita met him in the middle of the track.

"They were wonderful, darling. You did it!" She stretched up on tiptoe to kiss him.

Ted hugged her with his free arm. "No thanks to the referees. That Burwell wouldn't know a clip if he saw one."

"You didn't need his help. I knew you could do it."

"Rita, with a wife like you, how could I miss?" He pinched her bottom.

"Ted! People are watching!"

"Forgot myself. End run, you might say."

"I'll end run you! Now, be good! I've got to run."

"Oh, Christ! Snack bar?"

Rita nodded. "Ann Wirts didn't show. I'll have to work in her place until after the next game."

"That's two hours, or better!"

"With Ron's Broncos playing, it'll be longer than that."

Ted groaned. "I was looking forward to a tall beer and the Rams game on TV."

"I know. Maybe it won't hurt to watch Ron's game. You might wind up having to play him."

Ted grinned. "Fat chance. Looks like he's got it made in his division, but we don't have a prayer."

"After the way your kids did today? Ted! You haven't lost a game yet!"

"Look, hon. We've just finished the easy half of the schedule. We're going to be playing football teams from here on!"

"I'll argue about it later. Look at that line-up at the snack bar."

Rita turned and ran, her gold swing skirt bouncing and her black hair swishing across her shoulders. Ted stared after her, conscious of a pleasant tautness in his groin as he translated that motion mentally into response in bed. Not bad for a thirty-four-year-old woman, he thought. Hell of a lot better than most of the teenagers that were flaunting it around today.

"A penny for your thoughts, coach."

Ted looked down. "Cora! How come you're still here?"

Cora shrugged. "Al said not to follow him. He was too burned up and didn't want to take it out on me."

Ted chuckled.

"Ted, don't try to make it sound like it was Burwell's fault. You heard Al; everyone in the stands did."

“But it wasn’t clipping!”

“Of course not! No one but Burwell thought it was! But you’re the head coach and you didn’t scream out to the kids that there were days when they’d have to play against twelve men instead of eleven. That wasn’t the line coach’s place!”

“Well, no, but …”

“I’ve been married to Al for eighteen years, Ted. When he gets mad, he’s a big mouth. He knows it and so do you. He’ll sulk for three or four hours and be all over it. Forget it.”

Ted laughed and squeezed Cora’s arm. “What’re you supposed to do? Wait here until he’s human again?”

“He said you and Rita’d probably want to drop me off at the house and recap the game.”

“Of course!”

“Hey, coach! Good game!”

“Congratulations, coach!”

“You really wiped ‘em out, coach!”

Ted walked slowly through the parents of his boys, commenting on individual play and agreeing that it had been a fine game. They always were when the score came out on the positive side. Wait’ll they lost one.

At the gate, he lost most of the crowd and outside they scattered toward their cars. Ted strode along the vine-covered fence toward his own van. He’d get rid of the equipment bag and then have a look at Don Demming’s fabled Broncos in action.

“Hey! Not so darned fast!” Cora panted.

Ted slowed. “Hell, I didn’t know anyone was behind me!”

“I am.” Cora caught up and walked beside him.

They rounded the corner of the fence and reached the Dodge. Ted unlocked it and stowed the equipment under the rear deck. As he turned, Cora stepped close.

“Don’t I get my victory kiss?” she asked.

Ted glanced around at the empty lot and took her in his arms. “That you do, pet.” He swung her into the air and kissed her.

“Mmmm! Sweet victory!” Cora tilted her head back and smiled at Ted. “Remember the promise I made about if you won this one?”

“Promise? I …”

“When Timmy Gale’s father scouted the Bucks and told you about that power combination they used? And you made Ron switch his defensive line assignments?”

“That night he and Ross and I met at your house?”

“That’s right. Tuesday night.” Cora looked expectant.

“Well … I … you said it was going to be a grand-daddy victory kiss, didn’t you!”

“I sure did!” Her dimple showed. “I sure did, coach.”

Cora leaned back against the edge of the deck and held her arms up to Ted.

“Come here, baby,” she said.

Ted leaned down and took the half step that let him feel her toes against his feet. Her arms circled his neck and her lips molded themselves to his. He felt her body press against him, her breasts hard inside the bra she wore, her abdomen soft against his upper thigh. Sudden heat grabbed at his groin and he stiffened and Cora's belly ground itself against the hard shaft of his penis.

He clutched at her buttocks and drove his tongue between her parted lips. Her breath puffed on his cheek as she panted. Then she pulled her head back.

"Warm-up, darling," she murmured. Her voice was husky.

Ted looked quickly around again. There was no one. He heard a whistle from the field. They must be getting under way.

"Let's get inside, darling," Cora said. "It's too exposed out here." She glanced into the curtained van and back at Ted.

"That's cheating," he said.

"On Al and Rita?" Cora laughed. "You mean it'd put us one up on them?"

Ted shook his head. "I'm not keeping score. I was just thinking about their not knowing."

"Oh. Well, we'll tell 'em all about it, afterward."

Ted grinned. "I guess they won't mind."

Cora turned. "They won't. Boost me in."

He lifted her into the van and climbed in behind her, pulling the big doors shut and locking them. He unrolled the pad and drew curtains across behind the driver's compartment.

"Oooh! Cozy!" Cora snuggled against him. "Now for that grand-daddy kiss!"

Ted gathered her to him and crushed her mouth with his. Their lips rolled against each other, mashed by their teeth and sucking greedily. Cora pushed one foot behind her and arched herself inward to fit the curve of Ted's body. Out of the corner of his eye, Ted saw that her knee was raised and her thigh bared. He slid his hand over the thigh and she strained it wider, exposing the narrow strip of white nylon that half covered her crotch. He laid his hand over the strip and squeezed. Cora surged into the pressure and her arm tightened compulsively. She jerked her face free.

"Ted! Oh, Ted! Stop it!" But she thrust herself harder against him and saw her crotch on his hand.

Ted reached for her mouth with his lips and she drew back, turning to lie on the pad and stare up at him. His face approached hers and they locked again in that hungry kiss. Cora planted her other foot and levered her bottom off the pad, swinging her hips from side to side under the finger massage.

Ted pulled his other arm out from under her and awkwardly fumbled for the buttons on her blouse. She twisted her face free.

"No, Ted! Please! Don't undress me! Someone might come out here with Rita's key!"

Ted frowned and studied Cora. Then he grinned. "You don't mean that," he said. "You don't believe that."

She hesitated. "No. I don't believe it. But just my pants, Ted."

He sat up and slid one hand inside the front of her blouse and into one of the cups, closing his fingers on the hidden breast. With his other hand, he worked her panties off her hips and down over her thighs. She pulled one foot out of them and pushed them off the other leg.

"A quickie, baby?" Ted asked.

“Ugh! Don’t call it that, Ted! It sounds so dirty! It’s … it’s … " She clenched her fists beside her naked hips and looked suddenly troubled.

“What is it, baby?”

“It’s something else,” she whispered. “It’s the car and the sound of the crowd … " (He heard the crowd yelling in the background. It sounded like someone had broken loose.) “… and the smell of the equipment. It’s … Ted, the first time was …”

“This is how it happened?”

“The very first time. He was like you, Ted. Strong and fast. Oh, please! Go on, before I lose my nerve!”

He leaned on his elbow and pressed his lips to hers and rubbed his finger in tiny circles that made her clitoris roll. She pumped her hips and clung to his wrist and moaned in her throat. Abruptly, she released his wrist. Her fingers clawed at the zipper of his trousers and she wrestled his penis into the open.

She lowered her left knee to the pad and tugged at him until he rolled over it to crush his penis in the bristles over her crotch. She wriggled against it, arching up under his weight. Tearing her mouth free, she grunted at him.

“Now, Ted! Get it in now!”

He raised himself and felt with his fingers, guiding the head among her folds into the fluid and against her gaping opening. She was tight. She wasn’t waiting for their play to get her to the point where she’d draw it in as if she were inhaling it. He pushed gently.

“No, Ted! Jam it hard! Like he did that first time! Make it hurt!” She grabbed his buttocks through his pants and jerked at him. “Hard, Ted! Hard!”

He tensed, then drove against her upturned crotch, feeling her tissues yield inward and then

pop open before the brutal thrust. She gasped and clamped her lower lip between her teeth and tears leaped into her eyes.

"Oh, God!" she moaned. "That hurt! That did hurt! Now pump, Ted!"

He pumped, a long, rhythmic pumping that he knew would arouse her as it did him.

"Not that way! Fast and hard! Come, damn it! It's supposed to be my first time! Who the hell cares whether I come?" Cora tossed her head.

Ted slammed against her with short, vicious jabs, feeling the knot gather in his gut and the heat well behind his buried shaft. Whatever it was that had triggered this flashback for her, he didn't care. It had been a hell of a long time since he'd allowed himself the luxury of meeting his own tempo and to hell with the broad. He let his elbows take the weight of his upper torso and clamped his fingers on Cora's shoulders, pinning them hard against the pad. She writhed and tossed beneath him and dug her nails into his sides. He felt her draw her legs up until her thighs gripped his waist and her heels beat against his buttocks.

A great contraction seized the stuff at the base of his penis and hot fluid spewed through its passage into her. He grunted and smashed her bottom down.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" she cried. She began to shudder in great spasms. "Goddamn it! I … I'm … coming! Oh, goddamnit, Ted! I … spoiled … it!"

Ted felt his tension drain into her with his semen and then, having absorbed it, she dissipated it as women always managed to do and subsided into exhaustion.

"Oh, Ted," she whispered. "I couldn't go back. It wasn't the same."

"I'm sorry, baby."

"I … I guess I'm not, Ted. I got close enough. And I like it better now that I come, too." She smiled up at him, "I always like it with you."

“What made you want to go back, baby?”

“You know those times when you know you’ve been through things before? When everything’s happened sometime, somewhere, in your past? It was that. You’re winning and the referee and the congratulations and … He was the new coach, Ted. I think it was his first year out of college. We all fell in love with him. After that game, I followed him back to his truck … and he had one of those panel jobs and the floor was hard and full of splinters. But I didn’t care. I just wanted to give him my own special congratulations. Only he … he …”

Cora stopped and shuddered. Then her lips curved into a smile of recall. “He stunk. He was sweaty and smelly and half drunk because he’d won a game he was supposed to lose. And all of a sudden he pushed me onto my back inside the truck and had his hand inside my pants and his tongue in my mouth. I couldn’t fight him; I didn’t want to. I let him get my pants off and helped him find the hole. And he didn’t care whether I came or not. But God, was he furious when he found out I was …! Well, he’d figured I’d been had before.”

Ted chuckled. He felt uncomfortable, picturing that experience.

“Come on, baby. We’d better get back to the stands.”

“You’ve got Kleenex in one of these cupboards, haven’t you?”

“Sure.” Ted leaned across and dragged out a box of tissues.

Cora pulled out a handful. “Okay. Out, tiger.”

Ted pulled out and wiped himself off with some of the tissues.

“You go ahead,” Cora suggested. “I’ll be with you in a few minutes.” She pressed the handful of tissues against her crotch and clamped her thighs together. “Go on, now!”

Ted grinned and zipped himself up. He bent down to kiss her on the cheek, then eased

through the curtains into the front of the van and scanned the empty lot. “Hurry, sugar,” he urged.

“Go on! I’ll be with you in a little bit!”

“Okay.”

He let himself out of the van and closed the door.

Ron’s team was functioning with the precision Ted had been told about. The defense had mastered the technique of gang tackling, so that the opponents knew that every play would include a fight for the ball. His running game was coming apart under Ron’s clever defensive strategy and his quarterback couldn’t evade the blitzing linebackers to get off a pass.

With three minutes left in the first half, Ron already led twenty to nothing and he was playing one of his strongest opponents. Ted could see the frustration and anger of the other coach, even from this side of the field and he sensed the ominous quiet in the other stands. As he watched, the opposing fullback took a hand-off and plunged off tackle. Big Tony Miller, Ron’s left tackle, reached out and grabbed the back and Ernie Bowman, the middle linebacker, bored in for the kill. Ted winced at the impact, but he saw the football squirt into the air, where Ron’s left half-back picked it off. The gold-jerseyed back yelled bingo and raced for the side-line. Other gold jerseys immediately converged on him, setting up a screen between him and the stunned enemy.

It was Hershel, Ted realized. Charley Hershel. The green-clad Warhawks hadn’t a prayer of catching him. And they didn’t. He walked the last five yards.

The conversion made the score twenty-seven to nothing. Mercifully, the gun sounded before Ron’s boys could score again.

Ted felt a hand close on his elbow. He looked around.

“How’s it going?” asked Cora.

“Oh! Hi, stranger. Twenty-seven for Ron, a goose-egg for the Warhawks.”

“Oh, no!”

“Oh, yes. As the kids are going to say, Ron’s creaming them!”

“But they’re one of the strongest teams!”

“Not when they’re up against Ron!”

“How does he do it, Ted?”

“Cora, baby, I don’t know. I’ve heard rumors, but I haven’t had a chance to watch his boys before.”

Cora nodded. “Al says he heard there was a protest before the federation board about Ron.”

Ted shrugged. “I don’t know about that.” It just didn’t pay to comment on that kind of story. It might be true, but it might just be the sort of rumor that a coach as successful as Ron had to expect. So far, all they could prove was that his team was much too good to be playing in this league. And Ted was damned glad he didn’t have Ron on his schedule.

“Let’s go over to the snack bar,” he suggested. “I’ll buy you a cup of coffee.”

Cora smiled and her dimple looked deeper than ever. “I need it,” she said. “I sure need it!”

Chapter 2

RITA STACKED THE LAST OF THE HOTDOG buns in the steamer and measured the remaining snow cone ice with a practiced glance. It looked like there'd be enough supplies to last out the half time rush and maybe to get through Ron's second half … no more. They'd cut it close today. They'd probably gross well over two hundred dollars and the custodian's fee and the referees' would only be about a hundred and fifty dollars. They'd paid for the supplies already; it ought to be a profitable day.

She glanced out through the wire mesh at the line. There was Ted with Cora. Damned bleached blonde. She spoiled things … too greedy … couldn't look at a man without wanting him in her pants … Rita wondered if Cora really was a nympho, as Ted suspected. She'd been eager enough when the swap idea had come up; she'd pushed it harder than any of the men-and certainly harder than Rita or Elsie Ross.

But anyone who shacked up with Al could understand how Cora might like to try someone else. Al was all right, maybe, but he sure wasn't inspiring in bed. He made love like he ate-meat and potatoes, with all the juice cooked out of them. Still, he was sweet and funny as a coach and was a lot better this way than wondering if Ted was sneaking off for a little on the side.

She shook her head. It tore her up inside every time they got started-watching Ted feeling someone else up until he had whoever it was hot enough to scream-going off with some man she didn't really have any desire for and letting him have her while she imagined what Ted was doing to the other woman.

Ted reached the window and Rita looked past him at Cora. She tensed and felt her palms go clammy. Cora had just been had. It was written in her sleepy, satisfied expression. Goddamn the woman! They weren't supposed to go off and do it by themselves that way? Only when

both couples were together!

"How about a hot dog, honey?" asked Ted. "And one for Cora and a couple of cups of coffee."

Rita turned to the steamer without speaking. She made up the hot dogs and drew the coffee and took Ted's money.

"Learn anything about Ron's strategy?" she asked.

"He's drilled precision into those kids," said Ted. "Team's a machine!"

"We won't have much to haul out of here after the game, Ted. We're going to be sold out."

"Good! That's what I call planning. Hey, hon, have you seen Bill or Elsie?"

What's the matter, thought Rita. Now that you've had Cora do you need a piece from Elsie, too, before we go home? She nodded. "They came by in the middle of the first quarter and said they were leaving. They were going to stop in to see if Al was over his mad yet."

"Oh. Okay. Well, I'll see you after the game, sugar." He and Cora moved away from the window.

Oh, Ted! Rita cried inside. What's going to happen to us? Why can't we just get away from everything for a while and screw ourselves out-like we did in those months before the kids started coming? But she knew the answer before she asked the question. It was the kids-and the money. You didn't go off for weeks-or even days-by yourself with three lads in the house and no money for someone to take care of them. Maybe you didn't even then if you cared about them and wanted them to grow up decent people.

Instead, you worked your head off in the activities they took an interest in. You knocked yourself out for them and with them so you'd all have something in common. You decided it was worth it when the kids down the street got picked up for being on dope or joy-riding in someone else's car while your own were in bed asleep because they had to stay in training.

But you sat and looked at the same walls night after night-and the same stupid non-programs on TV-and sweated the budget and avoided the dentist if you saw him on the street. And you wondered where the world was going without you. You got close to the other parents who were doing the same things for the same reasons. Maybe you got close because you were too buried in Little League and Pop Warner and Junior Hockey to meet anyone else-or even to have anything to talk with them about.

Sex came up. With the papers and the movies and TV and the politicians and sociologists homing in on it the way they were, it had to come up. You talked about it and you talked about Victorian prudery and how it had turned the best things in life dirty. Sooner or later, that had to lead to personal philosophies and the separation between physical sex and "love" as if someone had suddenly discovered a great chasm dividing two plateaus.

Being as close as you got in this day-night whirl of football-and baseball and hockey-you'd all spent more than enough nights smashed and done more than a little concentrated necking with the other two coaches. You knew them better than just anyone. And somehow it got around to sex freedom among very close friends.

The line had melted away. Rita heard the referee's whistle and knew that the game was going again. She looked round at the nearly empty racks and let herself brood. She remembered that first time far too clearly. The worst of it was that it had been in her own home. Ted Jr. and Kathy and little George had been at Grandma's for the weekend. Ted had just been accepted as head coach for the Raiders and Al Sharp had agreed to coach the line for him and Bill Ross the backs. So they'd gone out to celebrate and had come back to the Browns' half-smashed at about one. The snack bar faded out and she could feel the heat of that night.

* * *

"Christ, it's hot!" Bill had commented. Only the words had been thick from the drinks.

"S'hot," Cora agreed. "S'too goddam hot for a sweater."

“Yeah! What th’ hell didja wear a sweater for?” asked Al.

“Dunno. Can’t remember.” And Cora fumbled with the buttons. She looked at the others as she struggled. “Dunno ‘bout you, but I’m not gonna sit here an’ sweat.”

She turned to Bill Ross and blinked. “Yer no gen’lman,” she said. “Why’n’tcha putcher drink down and help a lady!”

“Why not?” He’d set his drink aside and added the confusion of his fumbling to hers.

It looked to Rita like he wasn’t really after the sweater buttons. Apparently, Cora didn’t think so, either.

“Jesus Christ!” she muttered. “If ya unbutton my tits, my guts’ll fall out!”

Coming from Cora, it sounded terribly funny. Even Rita had to join in the laughter. And it fractured Al.

“I been tryin’ for years to get ‘em unbuttoned,” he announced. “Prize to anyone’t c’n do it.”

So Cora had plenty of help getting out of her sweater and you couldn’t really expect to get her tits unbuttoned while she still had her bra on. Cora was getting hysterical. It was the funniest thing she’d ever seen.

“I know something they don’t!” she called out to Rita. “There’s no buttonholes!” She leaned forward while they tugged at the bra hooks, then pulled her arms out of the straps and flung herself backward on the sofa.

“Go ahead!” she challenged. “Try!”

Ted and Bill each concentrated on one side, not without considerable argument over which belonged to whom. Cora writhed and shrieked with laughter, kicking her feet in the air until her skirt hung across her abdomen, leaving her hips fully exposed.

“God! I’m hotter now than I was before I got that damn sweater off!” exclaimed Cora.

“S’different,” Al observed. “Different kinda hot.”

Bill reached down with his free hand and felt Cora’s bottom. Her hips lashed to the side, sliding her crotch under the caress.

“See?” asked Al. “What’d I tell ya?”

Bill laughed. Rita looked at Elsie. Elsie was either terribly drunk or terribly hurt. She had her head down, but she was watching Bill through her lowered lashes and there were tears hanging on them. The tears startled Rita. Somehow she’d never visualized Elsie as the kind who even had tear ducts. With that chic, piled-up, frosted hair and her reserved manner and her lady’s bearing, you just didn’t think of the possibility that she could cry.

“That’s not the kinda hot ya get rid of in a cold shower,” Al said. “What the hell didja have to get her all worked up for? I’m too goddamn drunk to do her any good!”

“The hell you are!” Cora bounced and panted. “S’good thing we’re all buddies! I’d hate to be this drunk with anyone I didn’t know!” She clawed at Ted and Bill. “I dunno ‘bout Al, but someone’s gotta cool me off!”

Al chuckled and belched. “You got them tits unbuttoned yet, you guys?” he asked.

“Hell no! Can’t find no buttonhole!” Bill shook his head in disgust.

“Buttonhole lost? Well, how the hell ya expect to unbutton ‘em if ya can’t find the buttonhole? Sonovabitch must be on ‘er somewhere!” Al lurched to his feet and weaved his way to the bar for a refill. " ‘S up t’you, Bill. You started it.”

Bill and Ted pulled Cora upright and turned her from side to side, examining her.

"Here it is!" yelled Bill, peeking inside the waist of her skirt. Then, "Aw, hell! That's just her belly button." He studied her. "Must be somewhere else," he said. "C'mon, she's got it covered up." He unfastened her skirt and began to pull it off over her hips.

Cora twisted and pushed at his hands. "Go any further," she threatened, "and you gotta finish it!"

Bill hesitated. "Hm," he said.

"Why not!" Al demanded. "What else are friends for? Isn't that right!" He turned to Elsie and Rita with an owlish squint.

Rita looked at Elsie again. Elsie tilted her glass up and drained it. She'd been icy cool when they talked theory, Rita recalled. Maybe it was different in the flesh-Cora's plump flesh and Bill's bulk.

"I guess it is." It sounded to Rita like the words were choking Elsie. "Is it, Bill?" she asked.

Bill glanced over his shoulder at his wife. "We said it was," he said. "I guess we all agreed it was when it was for fun among friends."

"For cat's sake, stop talking about it and do it!" Cora wiggled her half-bared bottom.

Bill worked her skirt and panties down, exposing mousy brown hair that looked out of place in contrast to the platinum sheen on her head.

Rita watched Elsie blink, jarring the tears loose and set her jaw.

"Bill can find the buttonhole if it's there, Ted." Elsie said. She stood up, swayed and grabbed for support.

Ted abandoned Cora and caught Elsie. She leaned against him and turned up her face. Ted bent over her and kissed her-a light kiss.

“Is that all you want from me, Ted?”

He grinned and ran his hand down her front, letting it linger on her breast and again on her lower abdomen. Elsie was a different woman from Cora, Rita thought. Cora was the skirt and sweater type, whatever the occasion. Elsie was smart chic. Tonight, it was a fitted, button-down-the-back dress that must have cost sixty dollars. She might have gotten it at half price in a sale-Elsie was a good shopper that way-but it hadn’t been made to sell for less than sixty. And she wore hose and heels and jewelry-not much, but enough to look like she could afford to be out for the evening.

“Brr-r-r!” Elsie shivered. “Do that again! It gives me gooseflesh!”

Ted did it again. Rita realized suddenly what was going to happen. Bill was already half undressed, with Cora helping him as she panted for him. They’d wind up in a tangle on the sofa. Ted was going to have Elsie; she had to match Bill’s performance, no matter how much it hurt and Ted wasn’t going to have what it took to steer her to Al. He was going to lay Elsie. And as Rita glanced across at Al, she saw him eyeing her with awakening speculation.

God, no! Tonight, for the first time in her life, someone besides Ted was going to make love to her! Before this was over, Al was going to be on top of her, driving himself into her and panting and slobbering on her! She cringed and fought off the nausea. If it was what Ted wanted …

She couldn’t catch Ted’s eye. He was leading Elsie to the love seat and she was walking with the same poise she showed when she presided at the auxiliary’s board meetings. She was dead sober all at once, Rita recognized. Elsie was dead sober and fully conscious of what she was doing.

At the love seat, Elsie let Ted get settled, then sank into her arms. She leaned across him, making it look as if it were she who was making love, rather than he. And she rocked her head from side to side as they kissed, making it the kind of contact that too often got lost while the kids were growing up. Ted’s hands stroked Elsie as they would a cat, but at last he

felt for the hem of her dress and slid his fingers under it on her nylons. Rita watched the lump move hipward under the tight knit, until it cupped over one buttock and then saw it work its way over the thigh and disappear. She clenched her fists on the arms of her chair and tried to breathe. It hurt worse than she'd thought possible to see Ted doing this with another woman.

Elsie pulled away from Ted and stood. "Unbutton me," she told him.

Ted rose to his feet and started with the top button. When he finished, the dress gaped from neckline to mid-buttocks.

"Unfasten my bra while you're at it," Elsie directed.

Ted tugged at the back-strap and the hooks gave, letting the straps hang out over the parted edges of the dress. Elsie leaned forward and slipped the shoulders of her dress-and her bra shoulder strap-out onto her arms. She drew her arms out of the clothes and allowed them to fall. Her bra landed on the love seat; the dress hung from her hips, draped gently. She pushed it and her half-slip slowly down her legs and stepped out of them. Rita bit her lip as Elsie turned toward her. The woman's hips were those of a teen-ager, slim almost to the point of being boyish-and she wore no girdle. Instead, her nylons were pantyhose and she wore sheer briefs over them. From the waist up, she was nude. Her breasts were white-she'd shielded them from the sun-but the rest was a soft tan. Only her bracelets and a pearl choker and pearl earrings broke the lines of her flesh. Her nipples were darker than Rita had expected-almost as dark as her own-and small, rather than her own finger-sized kind. Rita wondered how they affected Ted.

"Do you want to finish undressing me now, or after you've got your own clothes off?" Elsie asked Ted.

Ted stood back and surveyed her. "Now." He stepped forward and carefully removed her panties, leaving her standing in her sheer pantyhose and high heels. He was breathing hard as he knelt to take her shoes from her feet.

He'll put a run in those damn hose, thought Rita. He has every time he's taken mine off. But he made a valiant effort, rolling them down by interminable degrees, so that Elsie came into view by fractions of an inch, like a statue being stripped of its protective burlap. The hair where Elsie's thighs joined was dark and thick and the white strip across her hips showed that she sunbathed in the briefest bikinis, covering less than an inch at the sides.

Elsie curled her legs under her when she sat back down to wait for Ted. She rested one arm along the back of the seat and let the other hand rest on her thigh. She was beautiful, Rita admitted to herself-as beautiful naked as she was dressed. Rita glanced down at her own rounded hips and full breasts and wondered if Ted would find he liked Elsie's type better. He mustn't! she thought in sudden panic. Oh, God! Don't let him like her kind of body better than mine!

His undressing was no strip-tease; it was just getting stripped in a hurry. And he dropped to the love seat and took Elsie across his lap. She reacted quickly to his caresses, but even as she writhed, she looked like she was going through a rehearsed, graceful dance. And when her hips were jumping, she pushed away and straddled Ted, guiding the tip of his penis into her folds with her tapered fingers and lowering herself to engulf it as if she were in slow motion. Rita choked and turned her head.

Al was suddenly beside her chair, kneeling next to her and apologizing. "I've been neglecting you, dark-eyes," he muttered. "I guess I was drunker than they were." He jerked his head toward the other two couples-Cora, flat on her back with Bill lying between her thighs, her arms around his shoulders and one of her legs lying across his now quiet buttocks and Elsie pumping herself up and down on the shaft that stuck up out of Ted's lap.

"I don't feel neglected," Rita murmured.

"You're not going to be, either," promised Al. "Did I ever tell you I like brown eyes?"

"Of course. Every time you get drunk." Of the three women, she was the only dark-eyed one. Cora's were tawny-a sort of deep hazel. Elsie's ranged from ice-gray to blue-green, depending on her mood.

“Brown-eyed women got dark tits,” Al told her.

Rita started. Was that true, she wondered. Cora’s nipples were pink. Her own were dark, but she doubted that proved anything.

Al closed his hand on her breast and she fought down the urge to squirm away. His fingers were going to seek out her softer flesh and her moist recesses. He was going to take off her clothes and spread her and stick his penis into her. He might excite her; she might cling to him and work her hips and stiffen in an orgasm. But she might vomit, too, and tonight she’d have to worry more about that than how she responded to his probing.

Chapter 3

IT WAS WORSE THAN RITA EXPECTED. AL was clumsy-big, like Bill was big-but clumsy and in a hurry. He pushed his hand inside the low neck of her blouse and under her bra cup and his fingers poked aside the tissue of her breast and hurt her as he clawed the whole mound into his palm. His skin was callused; it scratched her nipple. But he kneaded as he smothered her with his thick lips and she felt the prickle of early excitement shoot through her to lodge in her crotch. She leaned back in the chair with her eyes closed, aware that two of the buttons on her blouse had popped off and that the fastener of her bra had given way. And she felt her blouse peeled back and her bra pulled off and knew that she was as exposed as Cora and Elsie had been.

There was heat at her crotch; Al's crude efforts had already brought a flow of fluid. She squirmed as she felt the moisture spreading against her pants. She kept her eyes tightly closed and continued to grip the chair arms as Al's fingers left her breasts and touched her left thigh. She felt them creep up the inside of her leg, touching both thighs because she had them clamped together and reaching the tops of her hose. He pushed them upward over the bare skin, which was sweaty from contact and they reached the edge of her panties.

She gritted her teeth as he pushed the material aside and probed at her wet labia. For a moment, she held her breath to keep from vomiting. Al's other hand pried at her knee and she gave in, letting her thighs fall apart-pressing her knees against the arms of the chair. His fingers rubbed back and forth on the inner surfaces of her vulva folds and abruptly he pressed them inward, thrusting them to their full length into her.

Her hips jerked. She visualized how she must look, chest and breasts bare, head back against the back of the chair, hands clutching the chair arms, legs widespread, skirt pushed up and Al's arm disappearing into the darkness of that cave. Something—it must be his thumb, she thought wildly—jammed against her clitoris and began to maul it. She straightened, shoving

her body free of the seat. But there was no escape and physical excitement jolted her. She gasped.

"Oh, please, Al! Not so rough!"

He pulled his fingers out and she felt herself lifted and rolled and jostled as her clothes were torn from her. When she was naked, Al laid her on her back across the arm of the chair, her head resting on the opposite arm, her legs hanging out to the side. She tried to bring her knees together, but they encountered his trouser legs. She opened her eyes long enough to see him towering between her thighs, unbuttoning his own clothes as he stared down at her body. She shut them again, sickened at the appearance of haste and the mottled color of his face.

In a moment, it was his hairy legs that kept her thighs apart, instead of trouser-covered ones and his fingers stabbed inside her while he crushed her clitoris. She fought for control, but pain and passion mingled to make her thrash to his touch. There was a moment's respite and then a hard mass boring into the wet hole and filling her. Al pumped. He passed his hands under her buttocks and raised them so that he could stand erect with her pinned on his penis. Her back writhed with agony at its tight arc and she felt herself flung back and forth by his lunges.

To her surprise, she felt an orgasm sweeping over her and she was only faintly aware of Al's stiffening-or of the heat of his fluid as he spewed it into her.

"Hey! Rita! Snap out of it! Game's over!"

Rita shook her head and focused her eyes. She was still in the snack bar and Mrs. Woods peered at her with concern. There were kids coming on the run, eager for their after-game treats.

"Boy, you really were on cloud nine!" Mrs. Woods said. "Might as well have been sleeping with your eyes open." The older woman turned toward the window. "What'll it be, Donny?" she asked the first boy to arrive.

Rita went through the motions. Spring. That had all happened in the spring. Here it was fall and she didn't like swapping any better than she had then. She didn't like the way Al made love, nor the way Bill did. She didn't like having Ted give someone else the stimulus that belonged to her. Worst of all, she hated the two times when out-of-town couples-strangers-had shown up and joined their sex free-for-alls.

There was a lump of fear in her chest that wouldn't go away. Something was going to happen and it wouldn't be good.

The crowd at the window melted away and Rita and Mrs. Woods gathered the things that had to be taken out of the snack bar. Rita thought that Mrs. Woods was still puzzled by her earlier behavior and she wondered what kind of expressions and sounds she'd made as she relived that first experience. It chilled her to realize how revealing that daydream may have been. She was thankful when Ted and Cora came to the back door. She had to get away from the field.

* * *

They found Al sprawled out in his easy chair before the TV with a tall can of beer at his elbow. He was naked from the waist up, with a disreputable pair of dungarees emphasizing his relaxation. He grinned as they came in.

"Hi, ladies. Take off your tops. It's cooler this way."

"Al!" exclaimed Cora and Rita together.

He leered. "Admit it. You'd like to."

"Now you stop that, Al Sharp. You're a disgrace." Cora sniffed with pretended offense.

Al chuckled. "Welcome, boss coach. Sorry I blew it at the field today. Bill says you managed to keep the line alive in spite of my loss."

"I thought a couple of times that they were going to get away from us," Ted said. "But the kids kept right on hitting."

"Burwell will file a report with the federation, won't he?"

Ted nodded. "But we'll have to register a complaint about his officiating, too, so I wouldn't worry about it."

"I guess the Bucks' coach has more to be unhappy about than we do." Al drew a deep draft from the beer can.

"He did draw more penalties than we did. I'm not sure how the game would have come out without those."

Al squinted up at Ted. "What did you think of Ron's boys?"

Ted whistled. "I think the league has a real problem there."

"What kind of problem, Ted?"

"Ethics."

"Ron?"

"Yeah. You remember Darryl Strong?"

Al frowned, then nodded. "Sure! Played for Ron last year. Too old to go out this year."

"Right. He played today."

"What do you mean?!" Al sat up.

"He played right line-backer and left offensive end-well, really tight end-for Ron."

“How the hell did he get through weigh-in?” asked Al.

“He didn’t. He changed clothes with one of Ron’s third-string regulars after weigh-in.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. Haven’t checked yet. It was number eighty-three.”

Al rummaged through the stack of magazines and papers on the end table and pulled out the season program. He flipped the pages to Ron Demming’s roster.

“Here it is,” he said. “Broncos. Let’s see. Number eighty, eighty-one, eighty-two, eighty-three. Hm. Eighty-three … Mike Terrence.” He looked puzzled. “How come Mike’s people didn’t say something?”

Ted shrugged. “That’d be interesting to know.”

“What’re you going to do?”

“What I should do is call Wilson. Let him find out how come.”

“Wilson. Oh! Player agent?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, why don’t you?”

“I guess I’ll have to. Haven’t really any choice.”

“What was the final score, Ted?”

“Broncos sixty-three, Warhawks zero.”

"JESUS! Why'd he have to run up the score like that!" Al was on his feet now.

"Maybe he's out for some kind of record."

"Ted! The Warhawks were strong! They'd only had fourteen points scored against them before today!"

Ted's shoulders dropped. "They lost their first string quarterback and their two best running backs due to injury in the first series of downs. And their star line-backer got carried off on the first defensive play."

"And?" Al's eyes narrowed.

"I heard that their coach complained to Burwell about it—claimed every one of those injuries was done deliberately."

"Aw, come on. Even Ron wouldn't have his guys do that. How did it look to you?"

"I didn't see it. I hadn't gotten back from the van by that time." Ted grinned. "Parent conference."

"After a win? I thought you only got those when you were losing."

"This parent wanted to be sure I understood how much our fine coaching effort is appreciated."

Al began to grin. "Sounds like it might have been a mother. Who was she?"

Ted laughed. "The hell with that! I'm not about to violate a confidence!"

"I suppose Rita was stuck in the snack bar and couldn't look after you. I'll have to find out why the hell Cora wasn't on the job." Al punched Ted on the shoulder. "Must be hell to be so

irresistible."

"Go to hell!"

* * *

Ted called Jerry Wilson after dinner. Wilson promised to check out the illegal player.

"That's serious, Ted. If it's true, we'll have to suspend Ron. If the federation found out about it, we'd have to expel him from the local association and forfeit all the games he's played."

"I know that, Jerry. But if the federation found out about it and we weren't doing anything, they could lift our charter."

"Well, I'll let you know what I find out."

* * *

An hour later, Wilson called back. "Ted, I hope you didn't talk to anyone but me about the Darryl Strong business."

"Why?"

"It didn't happen. I called Ron Demming and the Strong boy and Mike Terrence. They all deny it."

"Jerry, if any of the kids on the Warhawks got a good look at Strong, the next time you'll hear about this will be from the federation."

"What do you mean? How would they know?"

"He got the 'most valuable player' award in the play-off last year and their team treated him to a big steak dinner. Remember?"

"I was out of town then, Ted. But I don't think that'd matter. Our position is that he wasn't on the field today."

"That sounds to me like a dangerous stand."

"That's my problem, Brown. You worry about your next game and let me worry about player eligibility."

"Did you warn Ron?"

"I don't see how that concerns you."

"All right, Jerry. I hope you don't sound this touchy if the federation starts asking questions."

"Good night."

John Gale came to the house immediately after Ted's conversation with Jerry Wilson. Ted broke out beers and the two settled down in the living room.

"I went out to East Fork to watch the Eagles today," John told Ted.

"Who were they playing?" asked Ted, knowing they'd played the High Vista Bombers.

"High Vista. Beat them thirteen to nothing."

"Let's see. We played the Bombers in our second game, didn't we," mused Ted. "Squeaked by."

"Fourteen to thirteen. They scored around end both times."

Ted grinned. "Those first two games showed up our outside weakness, didn't they. We've got that kind of thing stopped, now."

“So do the Eagles.”

“How do the Eagles manage to hold it?”

Gale opened his notebook and spread diagrams out on the floor. He and Ted got down on hands and knees and pored over the symbols and lines.

“They move with the flow of the play,” Gale said. “I haven’t seen another team in the league as strong in that department.”

“Fast?” asked Ted.

John Gale nodded. “Fast. What they lack in defensive size, they make up in speed.”

“They’re not big?”

“Maybe it was their uniforms-sort of a pale blue this year. But they looked smaller than High Vista, man for man.”

“Did High Vista make any decent gains?”

“Only on busted plays. Five or six times their backs got scared when they saw they were cut off. Turned around and ran back the way they’d come and picked up enough to scare the Eagles.”

“How about passes?”

“High Vista’s passer was out with the flu today. They didn’t throw much.”

“How did the Eagles score?”

“Off tackle from the six-yard line once and thirty yards on a double reverse the other time.”

They studied specific formations the Eagles had used and finished the beer. Gale stood, certain that he had told Ted everything he knew about the Eagles.

"How's Timmy coming?" asked Ted. "Is he going to be able to play at all this year?"

"I doubt it. The doctor thinks he might be out of the cast next week, but he won't be using the leg that well before the end of the season."

"We miss him, John."

"You should hear the groans when the doctor mentions any possibility that he won't be back for the last couple of games."

"I'll bet."

When Gale had left, Rita came into the living room. Ted gasped. She had on a fitted pair of white duck beach trousers-only. He stared at her, feeling hunger rise in him.

"Elsie called while you and Mr. Gale were talking," she said.

"Yes, we were, hon. Uh … Oh! She did? What about?"

"About how about getting together at their house next Saturday night for spaghetti and meatballs and booze."

"Saturday. Well, it could be a wake. Gale tells me the Eagles look strong."

Rita shrugged and her nipples jumped. "Maybe. But it could be a celebration."

Ted grinned. "Sounds good to me. Who else is going?"

"She said Al and Cora were going to be there and that she was asking Ron and Nan Demming."

“Ron and Nan! How come?” He thought about big, feline Nan Demming. There was one he’d like to ride! He’d never mounted one just like her. And redheaded, besides!

“How come?” Rita hesitated for a moment. Then, “She says it’s because Bill thinks we’re going to go all the way in our division. He thinks we’re going to go up against Ron in the play-off for the championship.”

“He does, huh.”

Rita nodded. “But I think maybe it’s because Ron’s so ruthless that Elsie wants to figure out a way to get into bed with him.”

“Honey!” Ted stared up into her eyes. “She’s not that kind!”

“I think she is, Ted.”

“Wow! Cora, maybe, but not Elsie.”

Rita didn’t answer. She moved her shoulders slowly and her breasts swayed.

“Goddamnit, baby! I can’t think of anything but you when you do that!” objected Ted.

“I don’t want you to.”

“You’re trying to tell me something.”

“Mmm. Hinting, perhaps. Am I too subtle?”

Ted reached for her. “Come down here, doll. What’s this ‘subtle’ crap?” He laid her across his lap and leered down at her.

“Ted! After all!”

“After all what?”

“After all you’ve had to do today. Aren’t you afraid this’ll be too strenuous?”

He squeezed her breast and bent his face close to hers. He growled. “We’ll have to remember the question next time we come up for air.”

Chapter 4

WITH RITA, IT WASN'T LIKE IT WAS WITH either Cora or Elsie. Cora'd get as hot and violent as anyone he'd ever heard about and there were times when Ted worried for fear she'd hurt herself. But once she was good and hot, she wanted to come. She could care less about holding off in order to enjoy some of the more refined variations, but she didn't.

Elsie was a puzzle. She reminded Ted of a computer, cool and precise and direct. She was as fast as Cora, but in a different way. She'd let excitement build up as long as she could control every reaction. The moment it looked like she was going to lose control of herself, she'd precipitate her orgasm-and the guy's. And she'd remain in control right through it. Ice, he kept thinking—hot ice.

But Rita! Rita was put together in a different mold using different clay! She was eager to build up. She did everything in her power to speed the process. And she'd reach the plateau that lay just below the summit of an orgasm with a minimum of effort. But once she was there, she counted on him to keep her there. She wanted to hover on the brink while she drank in all the subtle stimuli they'd discovered together and she counted on him to sense those moments when she was about to peak out and slack off long enough for her to slide back. She depended on him because she didn't want to worry about self-control. She didn't want to have self-control-or to think she was responsible for the things she did or said or that happened to her-when she was making love.

He liked to pride himself on the way he'd taught her, but he had to admit privately that she'd taught him, as well. It could be far too much for a man to sustain that kind of effort for two or three hours if he hadn't learned endurance. And she'd forced him to develop that.

He'd be as well pleased if they hadn't ever gotten mixed up in this damned wife-swapping. Sure, it grabbed him by the nuts to see someone else forking his woman, but it was a two-

edged thing. It half suffocated him with jealousy, for one thing. And every time they swapped, it seemed like a wasted opportunity-one charge wasted for each of them because his partner didn't have what Rita had and because Rita's partner didn't have the stamina to keep her screaming hot for the two or three hours she was used to.

It was a bit easier tonight, perhaps because of the afternoon session in the van, which left him calmer than usual. But it was good, as it was always good and by twelve-thirty, they were both ready to accept the spasms that would release them from their tautness and passion. He went to sleep wondering if he could invent some excuse for missing the Rosses' get-together Saturday. Not that they'd be doing any swapping, of course, but if they went, he and Rita probably wouldn't feel there was time enough for a session when they got home.

But no good excuse suggested itself to him and the week rolled past too quickly. They drilled the team on defenses against multiple reverses and reviewed their assignments on line defense. But there were no bad weaknesses and Ted preferred to improve their overall timing and hitting, rather than try to devise anything new and spectacular. He did run them through their triple reverse, which used an end-around, several times. They'd avoided the play in regular games, so far. He wanted to save it for a time when they absolutely had to have it. And Saturday came and they traveled to East Fork.

Burwell wasn't officiating this game. It was a Len Milton, whom Ted hadn't met before and his crew. Milton called Ted and the Eagles' coach together before the game.

"Brown," he said. "I want to give you a fair warning. My crew and I are going to watch your men like hawks. The first time we see anything that looks like a deliberate attempt to rough up an Eagle player, we'll order the offending players out of the game."

Ted stiffened, but Milton silenced him and continued.

"Furthermore, we'll weigh in immediately before the toss. I want to see each of your boys sign a card so I can compare his signature with the one on the official roster. After the weigh-in, you're not to let a boy leave the bench-or the playing area -without one of my crew checking him out and back in."

Ted waited for a moment to be sure Milton had finished. Then, "What's the idea, Milton?"

The referee stared at him. "I don't think I ought to have to draw a picture, Brown, but the federation has strong evidence to support this kind of ruling."

"From what date and against what opponent?"

Milton scowled. "This isn't a trial. I don't have to go into that kind of detail."

Ted exhaled, then took a deep breath and forced himself to loosen up. He spoke softly. "Len, I'm not trying to finger anyone. I think there may be a case of mistaken identity and you can clear that up if there is. Are you aware of the fact that Oakdale has two teams of Junior Bantams?"

Milton raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

"Was the word you got about the Oakdale Raiders or just the Oakdale Junior Bantams?"

"They didn't bother with the team name. But the things we're concerned about happened at the Oakdale home field last Saturday. You played at home last week, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir. So did the other Oakdale Junior Bantam team. Look, Mr. Milton. There wasn't an injury on the team I played last week."

The Eagles' coach cleared his throat. "If you know what team had injuries, we can prove that quickly enough," he told the official. "I have the league schedule right here. Brown's Raiders played against the El Gato Bucks."

"You're sure of that?" demanded Milton.

"Dead sure," insisted the other.

"That's right," agreed Ted.

"I owe you an apology, Brown. But I think I'll keep an especially close watch anyway. The disease might be catching." He didn't smile.

Ted turned to the other coach. "I guess introductions got missed in the excitement. I'm Ted Brown."

"Paul Mackey." Mackey held out his hand.

Ted gripped the hand and grinned. "My boys play by the rules, Paul. At least, they try to. But they're eager to win and I try to convince them that if they hit with anything less than all they've got they're dogging it."

Mackey reflected the grin. "Sounds standard. Good luck, coach."

"Good luck."

The game was a good one when Ted looked back on it. He ran sweeps at Mackey's ends often enough to keep them wide, but he expected to be stopped without a gain on those plays and he was. He used a sharp cutback, where the ball carrier on a sweep reversed himself to run against the defensive grain and the play went for substantial yardage. He pounded the interior line with power dives and he found that his boys could make three or four yards almost every time.

They scored with power plays three times after long sustained drives and once on a long pass. But they let the Eagles score on an intercepted pass and gave up two touchdowns when jump passes caught the line-backers out of position. And the game ended that way, with the score twenty-eight to twenty-one in favor of Ted's Raiders.

Paul Mackey congratulated Ted. "My boys figure they know how you beat us, Ted. Your kids just had one thing on their mind and that was winning. I wouldn't be able to name an outstanding player on your team; they played too smoothly together for that."

Ted was glad Elsie'd set up the party. He felt like celebrating. He could get worked up about having Milton stick him with Ron's tactics of last week if he cared to dwell on it, but today's victory meant he'd won five of his seven league games. There were only two left to play and he'd worried more about the East Fork Eagles' scoring capability than about anyone else in the league. Perhaps Bill wasn't just wishing. Perhaps the Raiders had a chance.

* * *

Ron and Nan Demming were the last to arrive at the Rosses' that night. Nan's hair radiated and an emerald green sheath dress set off its red brilliantly. She'd have needed no other ornament, but a great emerald pendant (synthetic, Ted was certain) hung centered on the skin bared by the low neckline and smaller teardrops of the same stone dangled from her ears. Her hair was piled high atop her head.

Ron bounced like a boy.

"Didja hear? Didja hear? We beat Ocean View eighty to zero!"

"EIGHTY!" Ted felt sick to his stomach. "How! That's the Jets?"

"Yeah, the Jets."

"They hadn't lost a game yet, had they?"

"Oh, sure!" exclaimed Bill. "They had a three-and-one record. The Warhawks had beaten them."

"Oh."

"They built their whole strategy around a kid named West," Ron said. "I figured if we covered West, they'd be dead."

“Both offense and defense?” asked Ted.

“Right. Their quarterback can’t throw and West was too good a runner to put under the center, so they set up their plays around a pitch out to West. He could pass or run, depending on how it looked to him. And he played a sort of deep monster man spot on defense. He was so fast he showed up wherever the ball was.”

“I didn’t know you had any real fast kids.”

“I don’t. But they’re mean.”

“Still, holding a guy like that out of the play for a whole game … !” Ted shook his head.

“They got a bad break,” Ron said. “West got hurt on the kickoff return. He made a fancy lateral and my kids thought he still had the ball.” Ron shrugged. “Breaks of the game.”

“Was it a bad injury?” asked Rita.

“I don’t know,” Ron told her. “They hadn’t gotten word back from the hospital when we left.”

Ruthless, thought Ted. A ruthless man who was building ruthlessness into the kids on his team. Probably compensation for having to be a mild-mannered yes-man on the job.

The spaghetti and wine mellowed them. And more wine as they sprawled on pillows afterward, listening to music—getting up from time to time to dance—mellowed them further. Congratulations seemed to be in order throughout the Oakdale contingent and they took the form of warm, intimate caresses from the women. It did not surprise Ted to find that Nan’s contribution to him was the warmest. His belly knotted when Rita clung to Ron, then relaxed as Cora managed to displace her.

Someone—he thought it was Elsie—turned off all the lights except for those in the chandelier, which were controlled by a rheostat and then turned those down to their lowest intensity. Conversation lagged and finally died out and Ted could hear only heavy breathing

and the occasional rustling of clothes or clink of glasses. He lay propped up on pillows in a corner near the fireplace and Nan was stretched out with her body pressed hard against his. She made soft, crooning sounds in her throat as their tongues thrust and parried.

He was strongly aware of the swell of her breasts against his chest and she held his leg between her knees. His hands rubbed and kneaded and she turned herself continuously to expose other areas to his caresses. He felt himself stiffen and Nan pushed her belly against the bulge of his penis and redoubled her tongue's effort. Ted glanced past her head at the others and saw patches of bare flesh. It was going to be one of those nights, even though Elsie hadn't said so. He drew his knee up between Nan's thighs, pushing her skirt ahead of it.

Nan's legs tightened momentarily, then relaxed, parting for his to move toward their juncture. He drove his thigh tightly against her crotch. Her warmth heated it and she clamped and released as if her thighs were winking.

He thought about undressing her. The dress would probably have to come off over her head; it zipped up the side and even with its low neckline, it would likely be a tight squeeze to get it down over her hips. Besides, it had been awhile since he'd pulled one off that way. He worked the zipper down a bit at a time, as if he were trying not to let her know. And he stroked her exposed thighs, inching the dress further up each time his hand reached her hip. The pretense of keeping her unaware was spoiled when he started to ease up the part of the skirt that had gathered under her hip. She raised herself without apparent effort to let him collect the material around her waist.

Nan was different. She had a generous bottom that Ted had thought of as muscled and hard. But the hardness and control was an authoritative girdle. He tested its fit with his fingers; it hugged her with a ferocious grip.

"Christ!" he whispered. "How do you get in and out of that thing?"

She tensed and he knew he'd offended her. He sought her mouth with his, ignoring the girdle while he worked her dress up over her bra. It seemed wise to unfasten the bra while she was in this position and the moment it was loose he slipped his hand under it to cradle a heavy

breast. Nan warmed, seeming to forgive him for his poor choice of words and he pulled away from the kiss to whisper again.

"That breast! It feels like the kind a man dreams of!"

Nan smiled with her eyes half closed. "It's yours tonight, darling."

He pulled the bra back and peered at her.

"My God!" he sighed. "Magnificent!"

Nan rolled onto her back and raised her arms for him to pull off the dress and bra.

"Be careful of my hair," she murmured.

He reached back to lay the clothes on one of the chairs, then put his mouth to the nearer breast, sucking the nipple deep into his throat. It was nearly as large as his thumb, but it had the consistency that was unique to nipples and its surface crinkled in hard ridges.

Nan raised her bottom off the pillow and began to work at her girdle. Ted breathed a sigh of relief. He'd been afraid he'd have to concede defeat. As the taut sheath inched down over her abdomen, her flesh appeared to swell behind it, bulging out in slow recovery from its wrinkled confinement. He laid his hand on her belly and felt the wrinkles fill and disappear and he rubbed away the film of sweat. Her pubis came into view, the hair straggling erect as the bulge beneath it filled out. And then she turned her moist face toward him and smiled.

"You finish it so I don't have to sit up."

He changed position and worked the shrinking tube off over her legs, noting that she'd unfastened the garters from the tops of her legs. And he rolled down her stockings, knowing that he'd snag them. He leaned back, then, puffing and surveyed the great form stretched before him. His revulsion at the girdle slowly evaporated. Without it, Nan had a full set of hips. But they didn't appear out of proportion to him. They flared outward from her waist in

a bold sweep that spoke of power and stamina and he ached to thrust himself in to the cradle they supported. Instead, he stroked the hair and again took a nipple into his mouth.

That goddamn girdle must be murder, he thought. Hot and binding. On impulse, he scratched Nan's abdomen lightly with his nails. She started, then stretched and squirmed. He smiled to himself around the mouthful of breast and continued to scratch, working his way into the creases at the tops of her thighs.

His fingers probed into the crevice between her legs and he parted folds until he located the harder mass of her clitoris. He'd expected it to be big, as she was big. But it was smaller than that of any one of the other women in the room. He manipulated it gently and Nan pushed her fists into the pillows beside her head.

"Good God, coach!" she exclaimed. "How do you do that?"

"Easy," he said. "Slow and easy."

"Oooh! It's just right! I like it this way!"

"There's plenty of time," Ted whispered, releasing her breast. "We'll work up easy."

"Yes … I'm going to like that!"

He dipped his fingertips down into the folds of her vulva and covered them with her juice. He smeared it on her clitoris, repeating the process until the area around the little organ was slimy with a thick layer of fluid. He resumed his gentle massage, but with the lubrication his finger slid instead of dragging. Nan jerked her knees up and let them fall outward, spreading her thighs wide. She began to moan deep in her throat and her breath came in hard pants.

"Ted!" she whispered, then. "Get some fingers inside me! I need something to remind me where this is going to wind up!"

He chuckled and forced his fingers into the hole, working them around the rim until it

stretched enough to take them. He found her clitoris with his thumb and started the easy massage and she forced her thighs further apart, he bore down with his thumb, until it was rolling the clitoris against the underlying bony structure.

"Oh, Jesus, Ted! Jesus Christ! Get aboard! I won't be able to wait for you!"

Disappointment dug at him. He was going to get cheated again. She was in a hurry! But he pushed off his pants and shorts and peeled away his shirt and rolled onto her.

"Mmmm!" she crooned. "Just lay on me this way for a few minutes. I won't cool down too much." She put her arms around him and held him on the cushion of her breasts.

Chapter 5

TED LAY STILL, BUT NAN DID NOT. HE felt her bulk writhe beneath him, kneading his belly and kneading the swollen penis that they crushed between them. He eased himself backward in her grip until his penis dropped into the void between her thighs, then hunched forward to bring its head into her wet folds.

“Oh, yes, coach! That’s good!”

Nan raised her knees and thrust upward against the stiffness of his penis. He felt it centering itself over the mouth of her vagina and he tightened his buttocks to hold hard against her.

“Now, baby,” she murmured. “Push.”

He felt for the cushions with his knees and pushed. He felt the head enveloped by hot tissue and leaned hard, driving the shaft to the end of her barrel.

Nan caught at his buttocks and pumped him against herself, grunting with each blow. He sensed her rising excitement and gave himself up to the novelty of the hard-working muscles that supported him. But suddenly she clamped her thighs together, wedging them under his and driving her knees up to drive his legs apart. He felt his penis throb as it bent against her overriding pubic arch and he knew that her clitoris was trapped between the hard base of his penis and her pelvic bones. He rocked experimentally and she cried out with a throaty note of pleasure.

Ted got his hands under himself and straightened his elbows, raising the upper part of his torso and letting his weight settle on their genital point of contact.

“Yes! God, yes! Now, do it hard!” Nan’s breath, exploded and her fingernails gouged into his

buttocks and she swept him back and forth on her quivering groin. He felt the nub of her clitoris roll between them and she thrust her bottom into the air so that he rocked on that one sense organ, shooting tremors that he could feel through Nan's body as the heat rose in his. The mouth that had swallowed his shaft contracted upon it and milked it and he felt the buzzing surge behind it in his guts that meant his semen would erupt. He tensed at the hot flow and Nan drew a shuddering, sobbing breath and stiffened in a deep arch. For a long moment, they hung in the passionate union, then both collapsed into the pillows.

Nan sighed and closed her eyes. "Oh, coach. That was so good! I feel like I might sleep until this time next week!"

"Ron won't like that," Ted mumbled. Good damn, he thought. I was right. She's another quickie. Get it in and bleed it and go to sleep.

* * *

Rita felt her trembling subside as Bill's sweat rolled off her. She was learning. It went best—and with the least fuss—if she just let herself go with whoever had her. She could sort of forget how much she hated it and how much it hurt to know that Ted was giving what was hers to one of the other women when she blanked out her mind and let her body go automatic. And she could manage to ignore the desire to dally on the plateau, that way.

Bill kissed her and rolled off. He kissed her again, a quick, easy kiss that said he didn't want her to think he was in a hurry. But he was. And in the next moment, he was gone. She glanced 'round. Cora huddled a few feet away, her back to Rita and her shoulders shaking. She was either laughing or crying, Rita decided, but it was silent, so she couldn't tell which.

Ron leaned down over her. Naked, he looked shorter and stockier than he did in clothes. His penis looked only half erect—swollen and red, but not taut and upright. His eyes glittered as he studied her naked body. He expelled his breath with a hiss and squatted beside her.

"You're a pretty little piece of ass, honey," he said. "I'm going to sample you."

"Ron! I just …"

"Never mind, sugar. Daddy'll do the thinking." He seized her breasts in his hands and squeezed them.

"Little but solid," he commented. "Not really a good mouthful, but they won't squish too much."

He lowered his head and sucked her left breast into his mouth, taking it to its very root. He sucked with a force that made her gasp and brought tears to her eyes. She dug her nails into her palms.

But his hand had sought out the dripping flesh of her vulva and he found her softened clitoris. He grasped it between his thumb and forefinger and rolled vigorously. Rita's body leaped into a high arch and it snapped straight and arched in rapid alternation as the agony slowly gave way to savage passion. Heat stabbed through her and her mouth was suddenly dry and her muscles thrashed.

Ron flung himself upon her and drove his knees between her thighs, jamming them apart brutally. She felt the head of his now hardened penis bury itself in the folds over the mouth of her vagina and then he lunged, pinning her on the stabbing shaft. She clawed and bucked, but he pumped mercilessly and the room appeared to darken about her. There was a sudden, hot gush within her and a vicious grinding pressure on the tissues of her genitals. She closed her eyes and felt the stiffness go out of Ron's body. His weight lessened and he pulled away.

"You're all right for a quickie, baby," he said.

* * *

After a long time, she opened her eyes. Ron was not in sight, but Ted was picking his way through cushions and clothing to her. He knelt beside her and slipped his arm under her shoulders, raising her and holding her to him.

“Are you okay, honey?” he asked.

“I think so, Ted.” She shuddered.

“Rough time?”

“That Ron! What a beast!”

Ted groaned. “That sonovabitch! I thought Cora got to him.”

“Bastard!”

“He had her for an appetizer. He got me when Bill left.”

“The way he handled me, I guess I was just a snack, too.”

“I guess he’s the same in sex as in his coaching.”

“I hate him! Ted, I hate him!”

“Well, we don’t have to be around him.”

“Then let’s not.” She glanced at the others, who sprawled in varying attitudes of exhaustion.

“Ted?”

“Yeah?”

“Do we have to stay?”

“Hell, no!”

“Let’s go home, honey. I’ve got to have a hot bath!”

Ted hugged her. “Where are your clothes?”

“They ought to be close. I haven’t moved around much.”

He found them scattered within arm’s length and helped Rita into them. He recovered his own and dressed quickly. Bill was stretched out next to Nan and he heard Elsie muttering to herself in the kitchen.

“Come on, doll.” He pulled Rita to her feet and they went to the kitchen.

Elsie leaned, naked, against the counter. Her normal grace was betrayed by an expression of disgust on her face. She brightened when they appeared.

“That Ron Demming is a pig!” she exclaimed. “I’ll never invite him here again.”

“Did he bother you?” asked Rita.

Elsie shook her head. “And he’d damn well better not! But you ought to see what he did to Cora!”

“Hurt her?” Ted stiffened.

“The bastard bit her!”

“Bad?” Ted clenched his fists. Cora was wild, but there was no need for that kind of thing.

“She ought to have something done about it. She probably won’t, though. She’d be too embarrassed.” Elsie scowled and folded her arms below her breasts.

Ted took a deep breath. “Does Al know … or Bill?”

“Not yet. Cora’s afraid it’d start a fight.”

“Hm. Where’s Ron now?”

“Here I am, tiger!” Ron bounced into the kitchen looking hairy and hungry without his clothes.

He reached for Elsie.

“Come on, chick. Let’s screw!”

Elsie twisted away from Ron’s outstretched hand. “Not tonight, Ron. I’ve had it.”

“Come on! What kind of hostess are you? Put out, kid!” He made another grab for her.

“Stop it!” Elsie glared at Ron.

“Come on, twist! You won’t miss the little bit of pussy I want!” Ron narrowed his eyes and moved slowly toward Elsie.

She sidled along the counter. “Ron! I warn you, I’m not in the mood.”

His voice was suddenly hard and flat. “Then get in the mood, chick. You’re next for old Ron. You’re the dessert.” He seized her arm and jerked her against him, his other hand darting to her crotch.

She cried out and Ted took a quick step forward to slam his hand down on Ron’s shoulder.

“Knock it off, Demming!”

Ron shrugged Ted’s hand off and lifted Elsie off her feet with the hand that he had forced between her thighs. “You’re gonna give, goddamnit!” he snarled.

“NO! Ron, you’re hurting me!” Elsie struck at him.

Ron laughed and shook her in the air. “Bitch! Stuck-up bitch! We’ll see!”

Ted grabbed both of Ron’s shoulders and ground his fingertips into them.

“Put her down, Ron! Get your hands off her before I count to three!” He sensed that his voice was louder than he’d intended.

“Go screw yourself, boy scout!” shouted Ron. “Mind your own business!” He lowered Elsie so her toes touched the floor. “You’re all dressed, Brown. Shove off! Get your ass out of here and let a man work!”

Ron hadn’t moved his hands. He held Elsie securely by her upper arm and her crotch. She writhed and jerked, but could not loosen Ron’s grip.

Ted drew one hand back and chopped it to Ron’s biceps. It was a vicious blow, the hard edge of his palm cracking loudly against Ron’s muscles.

Ron yelled with rage and threw Elsie from him. He whirled to face Ted and went into a crouch. Out of the corner of his eye, Ted saw Bill come into the room and leap to where Elsie huddled on the floor. Things should quiet with Bill here.

It was time to calm Ron—to give him a bridge he could cross into reason. “Easy, Ron. Easy. That wine was stronger than we thought.”

“Screw the wine! Screw you! Screw the whole goddamn world!” Ron edged toward Ted.

“Easy does it, man! Cool off first.” Ted watched Ron closely.

“You butted in where you weren’t wanted, Ted. That’s a bad habit.”

“Don’t sweat it, Ron. I smoke, too. Pull some clothes on and relax. The party’s about over.” Ted kept his voice low and easy and saw the tension draining from Ron’s features.

“Aw, shit! What’s the use?” grumbled Ron. “It’s not worth a hassle.”

“Of course not. Come on. I’ll fill your glass while you get dressed. Or maybe pour you a cup of coffee.”

Ron’s attitude reversed abruptly. “Good ol’ Ted! Hell, yes! Coffee! Gallons of coffee! Jesus, I must have been smashed! Coffee, Ted!” He pushed past Ted with an exaggerated stagger, searching for his clothes.

Ted poured coffee in the largest insulated mug he could find. That’d give Ron something to nurse for a while. By the time the mug was empty—or cold—the Demmings could beat a graceful retreat and the incident would be closed.

Rita collected Elsie’s clothes and brought them to her in the kitchen. She was helping her, now-or giving her encouragement and holding the clothes for her.

“You’re not hurt, honey?” Rita asked.

“Just my pride, I guess. Oh, I suppose I’ll have a bruise or two, but not the kind I can go around showing people.”

Bill turned from Elsie and paused beside Ted.

“Damn good thing you were out here when Demming made that pass!” he said.

“Yeah. He was in a hurry.”

Bill exhaled loudly. “If I’d come out when Elsie yelled and you hadn’t already had things under control, I think I might have killed that bastard!”

“You’re not thinking of it now, are you?”

Bill shook his head. “Naw. He’s not worth it.”

“Whatever made you ask them for tonight?” asked Ted.

“I dunno. I guess Cora asked Elsie to. And then I figured it wouldn’t hurt to build up a little good feeling before we met them in the play-off.”

Ted laughed. “We’re not going that far. We still have our two toughest games to go.”

“I think we’re going to make it, Ted.”

“We could, I suppose. But it’d surprise a lot of people.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time people got surprised.”

“Bill, why don’t you check to see if Cora’s all right?” suggested Elsie.

“Okay, hon.” Bill popped an olive into his mouth, winked at Ted and left.

* * *

At home, the kids were sleeping and the dog was frantic with joy at their return and the house seemed to exude an atmosphere of peace.

“I’m so glad to be home,” murmured Rita. “I half wish we hadn’t gone tonight.”

Ted nodded. He wished they hadn’t, too. Celebrating was fun, but there were times when he wished things had no chance of breaking into an orgy. Of course, tonight had been worse. It scared the hell out of him to have someone from outside their little circle discover their loose familiarity. There was too much danger of talk.

“I’m going to brew a pot of tea,” Rita said. “I’m thirsty for some.”

"Tea!" Ted shook his head and grinned. "Tea at two in the morning?" He'd a lot rather have another cup of coffee, but it wasn't important enough to worry about.

"It'll taste good. I've got some sugar cookies to go with it." Rita bustled about the kitchen.

In the end, Ted settled for a glass of milk to go with the cookies. He noted that it was three when they finally were ready to turn out the lights and go to sleep.

* * *

John Gale came to report on the Orangeville Rebels, arriving during the lazy part of Sunday afternoon.

"They beat the sox off the Bucks," he said. "They're a passing team, Ted."

"Long passes or short?" Ted asked.

"They don't care. Whichever you're not ready for."

"What about their running game?"

John shrugged. "Mediocre. They didn't make a first down on the ground all day and every point they scored was through the air."

"Maybe we could drop to a four-man line and smother their receivers," suggested Ted.

"Maybe. I think the Bucks tried to, but those Rebel receivers were as fast and tricky as you'd hope to see in our league."

"Really fast?"

"They looked like it. But what made it for them was the way they kept faking the Bucks out of position. They have me worried, Ted."

“Must have a good quarterback.”

“He’s a great scrambler. And they had two other backs who could pass just as good. The Bucks never knew who was going to be throwing.”

“What about their defense, John?”

“They were wide awake. Very quick.”

“Fast?”

John shook his head. “Not terribly fast. Just quick. They reacted!”

“It wouldn’t be easy to fool them with fancy ball-handling, then.”

“I doubt it. And power plays won’t likely get very far, either. They converged too fast.”

“How about their pass defense?”

“Good. They probably get a lot of working out against their own passing attack and that’s taught them a lot.”

“It sounds like you’re saying there isn’t any way to move against them.” Ted rubbed his chin. “There’s got to be something we can run!”

John leaned back and sighed. “Want my honest opinion, coach?”

“Of course!”

“I don’t think we’ll get a first down. I think they’re going to kill us!”

John Gale!” Ted stared at Timmy’s father. He couldn’t imagine such pessimism from him.

"John, how long's it been since you watched the Raiders play?"

John grinned. "I saw the first two games."

"And you've been out of town scouting for us every Saturday since."

"That's right."

"I'll tell you what. Steve Thompson's father's been taking home movies of all the Raider games. Let's see if he'd let us borrow them. You need a chance to see how the boys play now."

"Great!"

It was Tuesday evening before they were able to view the Thompson films. Bill and Al joined John Gale and Ted. They ran the footage on their second game, first, to provide a base for comparison. Ted suspected that they'd get the best contrast by showing the latest film next. The reels on their game against the Eagles were being processed, but those on the Bucks' game were in the box.

"It doesn't look like the same team!" exclaimed John.

Ted studied the action thoughtfully. The camera angle gave him a different view from the one he got from the side-lines. Even he hadn't realized just how smooth the kids had gotten.

John shook his head at the conclusion of the film. There was awe in his voice as he spoke. "Forget what I said, coach! The Rebels are all that I said they were, but I doubt that you'll have any trouble with them." He chuckled. "Not unless you have a real bad day, that is," he added.

So they continued to polish execution and timing. Ted thought about shifting positions by a foot or so, here and there, then gave up the idea. His boys didn't need that kind of help. It would only throw off their habit patterns. He increased the amount of agility drilling and the number of wind sprints for each practice and reduced contact work. And he wandered off to the side frequently to avoid the temptation to lecture too much.

Chapter 6

ON WEDNESDAY, JERRY WILSON CALLED Ted at work.

"There's an emergency board meeting at eight, tonight, Ted. We'd like you to be there."

"It'll be tight, Jerry, but I'll make it. What's the problem?"

"Federation complaints about the Oakdale Junior Bantams. The federation president will be there."

"Anything serious?" Ted asked, knowing that Ron's tactics were at issue.

"Could be. They're questioning things like excessive injuries in games."

"The Raiders are pretty clean, Jerry. There haven't been any serious injuries in any of our games."

"You're winning, Ted. It may be hard to prove that no one's gotten hurt."

"I'll be there."

The seven elective officers of the Oakdale association were there when Ted arrived. Ron Demming came in right behind him and the federation president, eligibility director and rules chairman arrived together about ten minutes later. Ted had decided to bring Thompson's films and a projector, just in case and they were in the van.

The federation president lowered himself into the chair next to the association president's and suggested that the meeting get under way.

"You haven't all met me," he said. "I'm Don Beam. Mr. Yoshi is my eligibility director and Mr. Garcia is the federation rules chairman. Where are the Oakdale Junior Bantam coaches?"

"Here," chorused Ted and Ron.

Jerry Wilson introduced them. "Here are their schedules, Don. Ted has the Raiders and Ron, the Broncos."

"Hm. All right. What I'm here about is complaints from other associations about Oakdale Junior Bantam roughness and player eligibility."

"Roughness?" asked Wilson. "It's a rough game, Don!"

Don Beam turned in his chair to stare at Jerry. "I know that, Wilson, I expect boys to get hurt from time to time."

"A coach is likely to yell when he thinks he's got a good team and he gets beat bad!" Jerry continued.

"Maybe."

"He'll yell about everything else, too. Crooked refs, a bad field, a bum timekeeper …"

"… and player eligibility," Beam finished.

"Sour grapes," said Jerry.

"Wilson, how many of your top players have been put out of action this year by injury?" asked Beam.

"I'd have to check. How about your team, Ted?"

"None. I lost Timmy Gale with a broken ankle, but that happened in scrimmage and I wasn't ready to call him my top player."

"How about you, Ron?" asked Jerry.

"None."

"Have any injuries at all?" Beam inquired.

"Sure! Couple of pulled tendons … a few bad bruises … Nothing major, though."

"Lucky," commented Beam. "Some other associations didn't make out that well." He showed them a list. "Last Saturday, the Jets lost their number one man on the opening kick-off. That was in a game with Oakdale. Saturday before last, the Warhawks lost four men. It turned out they were their top four players. Two weeks before that, the Saints lost their top two. Always against Oakdale." He looked grimly from Ted to Ron. "Interesting."

Ron snorted. "Three teams. Coincidence."

Before Beam could reply, Wilson spoke up. "You're making a big thing of the fact these were outstanding players. Those three teams were strong teams, too, weren't they?"

Beam nodded. "Couldn't tell about the Saints. That was only their second league game. But they won their first and walked all over three pre-season opponents. Some of the federation people figured them to be the champions." He glanced down at the list. "The Warhawks and Jets were hot."

Jerry leaned back in his chair. "You've been around the game for a while. Get a kid this age who figures he's a star and put him on a winning team. What happens? He gets careless. Doesn't bother to keep in condition—makes the grandstand play—can't be bothered to stick with his blockers. Who else is as likely to get hurt?"

"You people have two undefeated teams in this age bracket. All of the bad injuries to top

players in Junior Bantams this year happened in games against Oakdale. It doesn't feel like coincidence."

Ted exhaled an explosive breath. "Wait a minute!" he said. "Check those teams with injuries against the schedules Wilson gave you!"

Ron stiffened and glared at Ted. Beam looked from the list to the schedules. He found each of the complaining teams on a schedule and checked it off. Laying the list aside, he studied the Broncos' schedule, a line of white appearing at each corner of his mouth. At length, he looked up.

"Let me change the subject for a moment," he said. "I have a report that there are at least two ineligible players in the Oakdale Junior Bantams." He turned to Jerry. "You're the Oakdale player agent?"

Jerry nodded.

"Have you heard about this?" Beam asked.

"I got one report on a possible ineligible boy and checked it out. It wasn't true. We haven't any kids on either team who aren't eligible."

"Hmm." Beam glanced at Yoshi. "You haven't completed your investigation of these complaints, have you."

No, sir.

Beam turned to mild-mannered Jens Jensen, Oakdale association president. "Jens, we've come to you without bringing out the eligibility thing. We'd really rather you got to the bottom of it and took your own action than to get there ourselves and have to call you in."

"I understand that," Jens said. "I doubt that we have a problem, though. Jerry's been around the association for a long time. He knows most of these kids personally."

"I suppose so," Beam conceded. "You know that if you've used an ineligible boy, you forfeit every game he played in."

"Yes."

"I suggest you review all of the boys who are playing in Junior Bantams."

Jensen nodded. "We can do that."

"Good. Then let's get back to the injuries. I don't think Mr. Brown needs to stay."

Ted rose and glanced at Jens.

"Thanks for being here, Ted," Jens said.

"Oh! Before you go, Brown, let me make a suggestion on this eligibility thing. Usually, a coach knows more about his boys than anyone else. Why don't you take a look, yourself? You'll feel easier in your own mind-especially if you win these next two games."

"I'll do that," promised Ted. He left without looking at Wilson.

* * *

At home, he found the Rosses and Sharps waiting with Rita. From the ash trays, it appeared that they'd been there for hours. He glanced at his watch to find that it was only nine-thirty.

"Hi, boss coach," called Al. "Big pow-wow?"

Ted grinned. "Scalp expedition," he replied. "Seems that some braves cheat."

"Ugh! What's new?"

"The federation keeps forgetting we've got two Junior Bantam teams in the Oakdale association." Ted poured himself a cup of coffee and eased into his favorite chair.

Bill leaned forward. "What was the problem, Ted?"

"Two problems. Ron's kids have crippled seven star performers on three teams, so far this season. The federation thinks that's cutting it too thick. And they've had reports of ineligible players."

"Did they have names?" asked Bill.

"No." Ted sipped at his coffee. "They didn't even say which team."

Al paced the floor. "I keep thinking of Ron's team. But eligibility can clobber anyone!"

"It sure can," agreed Bill. "Someone could read the birth certificate wrong or miss the fact that a kid lived on the wrong side of a boundary street or …"

"… or didn't get high enough grades last spring," Ted finished.

"Not only last spring," muttered Bill. "You signed Ted, Jr.'s report card a couple of weeks ago, didn't you?"

"Quarterly report? Come to think of it, I did,"

"Was it okay for eligibility?"

"I didn't even think about it. Let's see now …" Ted stared at the ceiling. "Yeah, it was okay."

Al stopped pacing and faced Ted. "Looks to me like we'd better do some fast checking."

Ted nodded. "Let's break down the roster in thirds. That'll give us each eleven kids to ring out, including our own." He went to his desk for a roster and cut it into three pieces. "Here

you are. We'd better call the parents for a report card check and birth certificates. I guess it's too late to start tonight."

"Quarter to ten?" Bill considered. "Yeah, I sup pose so. What about association boundaries?"

"We can do that right now," Ted said. "I'll get a map."

All addresses were safely inside the boundaries.

"When we make our calls, we can check to be sure the kid still lives at the address we have for him," remarked Bill.

Elsie sighed. "Have you solved all your football problems for tonight?" she asked.

Bill chuckled. "Ask old slave-driver," he said.

"Hey! That's no way to talk!" protested Ted. "I'm a soft-spoken, easy-going friend of the underdog!"

"All right, coach. Are you finished for tonight?" Elsie stretched as she waited for him to answer.

"Sure. There's nothing else we can do."

"Except lay out strategy for this Saturday's game," she retorted.

"That's done," Ted assured her. "Our only strategy is 'go out there and win!' Is there another way to plan?"

"I don't know," she said. "I hadn't thought about it. There is one aspect of the game I've been meaning to ask you about. Suppose you'd have time to explain it to me tonight?"

"Why not?"

She smiled sleepily at him. “It’s awfully elementary, I’m afraid. I’d be terribly embarrassed to let everyone see how stupid I am.” She glanced around at the others. “You wouldn’t mind if I had Ted educate me in the den, would you?”

Ted saw Rita start. Hell! It was going to be another one of those times. But he looked more carefully at Elsie and a spark of excitement stirred in him. She looked just as poised as ever, but the thing she was wearing offered a challenge. He hated those goddamn sack dresses, ordinarily. They hung from the shoulders with no pretense at fitting. A woman could be eight and a half months pregnant and look the same in one as a nineteen-year-old fashion model. True, if she moved around in it, there was some possibility of allure where her flesh touched the cloth, but even that was lacking with most women.

With Elsie, he knew what was underneath and the thought of peeling off that shapeless hull to ex pose her figure sort of made his mouth dry. There was a pleasant tingle in his groin and he glanced again at Rita. She shrugged. He thought her smile was a little late.

“Go ahead,” Rita said. “He ought to be able to explain just about anything in there without running the risk of embarrassing you.”

He sure as hell ought, he reflected. It was sound-proof and the door locked from the inside. No danger of one of the kids stumbling in at the wrong time.

“Okay,” he said. “School’s about to open.” He got up and led the way to the den.

Elsie perched on the edge of the desk. “Is it really sound-proof in here?”

“You might hear a gun if someone fired it right outside, but if you got locked in, you’d never be able to yell loud enough to get help.”

“That’s good. Ted, why do you me put so much time into something that doesn’t go anywhere?”

“Are you asking about me or Bill?”

“Bill, I guess.”

“Well, I suppose it’s the kids. Coaching gets ex citing; it’s a challenge. But I’m damned if I’d do it if it weren’t for Ted Jr.”

“Is it a sense of obligation? The fact that if there weren’t volunteers there’d be no program?”

“Naw. There’d always be someone who wanted to coach. With me, it’s a way to be interested in at least one thing that Teddy’s interested in.”

“That’s what Bill says. That football’s the only thing he and Dana agree on.”

“I don’t understand that! What’s there to disagree with the kids about?”

“Hell it’s not that, Elsie. It’s just that the kids don’t really want to talk to us about anything they’re doing. They live in their own world and we’re not in it. It isn’t really disagreement.”

“It’s sort of like that with men and women, isn’t it? I mean, a husband lives in one world and his wife in a different one.”

“Well, they overlap.”

“A little, maybe. But they only talk to each other—or want to listen—about the part that does overlap.”

“Maybe.” He thought about it. By God, she was right! He wondered if all marriages were like that. And what was the overlap? Sex and kids and house and yards. Friends, if you had any. “I guess you’re right,” he said.

“Ted?”

"Yeah?"

"Bill and I … well, we've been talking to each other more, since … since you and Rita and Al and Cora. A lot more."

"Another area of overlap?"

"Not really that, so much. I guess we just work harder to be close. I don't know what that means."

"Neither do I."

"We … I … I've never felt so close to outsiders before as I do to you other four, Ted. I wonder if we'd ever have known each other as well if it hadn't been for swapping."

"It would have taken a hell of a lot longer," he said. He suspected they'd have drifted apart after the kids passed the football age and they'd not have gotten nearly as close by then as they already were. That much, their extra sex had brought them. Of course, it could wind up by bringing troubles, too.

Elsie turned up her face. "That's enough philosophy, darling. Kiss me."

He leaned down and let the warmth of her lips seep through him. He touched her tented dress, then rested his hand on the flesh underneath. A woman felt all kinds of different ways through cloth. Sometimes, there'd be so many layers she didn't feel like a woman at all. Other times, the material would cling to her and a guy's hand would feel the texture of the cloth instead of that of the woman. Tonight, Elsie's shift was the kind of stuff that stuck to his hand and when he stroked, it was like having a piece of cloth glued to his hand, feeling her skin through it.

A surge of excitement washed over him. He was feeling her skin through the shift! Not pants or slip, but skin! He stroked upward to her breasts. Sure as hell! For the first time since he'd been in a position to find out, Elsie had gone out with nothing under her dress but herself!

Not a goddamn thing!

“Jesus!” He let out his breath. “Jesus, Elsie!”

“You like it that way?”

“I do!”

His fingers traveled over her form with loving attention. It was like discovering her again.

She twisted under his touch and pulled his face down for another kiss.

“Mmmm!” she crooned.

Chapter 7

IT WAS ALMOST LIKE BEING IN A DREAM. There was no hurry and no sense of urgency. Ted's fingertips lingered over each change of contour in the slender form before him, exploring, caressing, promising and he let her lips move softly along his own. There was a periodic trembling in the flesh that he touched. Elsie shook, then calmed, then shook again. He visualized her lean lines and savored the knowledge that when he was ready he could lift the edge of her shift and draw it over her head to reveal those lines. He tingled with the thought that he wanted to prolong this time of waiting. And his hands continued to stroke and probe.

"Darling," she whispered, the word muffled against his lips. "Darling! Your hands feel like they're on fire!"

"Because they make you hot?" he asked.

"No! Maybe I'm just cold, but I can feel the heat right through my dress!"

"Hmm." There wasn't anything to be said. Funny how a woman felt things.

He laid his palm against her hip. By God, her skin was cold. It was like ice! But her circulation was going to pick up and before long she'd feel like she had a fever. He began to caress her with long, even strokes, pressing his hands hard against her. The shift continued to cling to his hands, rather than to her and at the top of each stroke he knew that she was exposed all the way up to her hips.

He hungered suddenly for the feel of her bare skin. He moved against her at a moment when her shift was pulled high, trapping it there and put his hand down on the outside of her thigh. When he stroked upward, it was skin sliding over skin with the cloth riding ahead. As he'd

known would happen, the contact drove a keen edge of eagerness into him and he had to have that damned shift out of the way.

He caught at it with both hands and Elsie raised her arms while he pulled it up over her. He stood back to watch it rise, his belly knotting as it bared her hips—and the mousy patch of hair between them—and her belly and the lower edge of her rib cage. He paused, then drew it up past the swell of her breasts and off over her arms.

Elsie stood motionless for a moment, her arms still stretched toward the ceiling. Ted held his breath. Somewhere, he'd seen a painting like this—a slim, youthful figure on tiptoes, its lines arched up and back, face uplifted, arms raised for blessing. He was aware of a kind of sadness for his lack of words or artistic skill to capture the poetry of Elsie's surfaces. He would never be able to de scribe the shadowed hollows that extended up and down her body—or the ribbons of highlighted flesh that separated them. But maybe preserving the picture for others would be a waste of time, anyhow. What counted was the blend of light and shadow and line and surface with the tenderness he felt toward Elsie. And no one else could know precisely that combination.

He reached out to run his hands lightly down her curves and she trembled and lowered her arms, putting them around his neck.

"Darling," she whispered. "I want you so tonight!"

His caresses became sure and purposeful. The interlude of detached enjoyment of her lines and surfaces was gone. In its place was hunger and a need to fire her with passion. She jerked and twitched and he narrowed the area that he massaged until her hips broke into a hard pumping motion and her legs stretched wide.

He opened the fly of his trousers and let his penis spring into the open, crouching to place its head at the heart of her heat and moisture. He straightened his legs gradually, feeling the bulb of his penis penetrate her and then the shaft. And he continued to straighten them until he stood erect and she dangled on the rampant staff, her legs flanking his. He grasped her buttocks with his hands to ease some of the strain from his penis and she lifted her knees,

clamping them in against his sides.

She grunted softly as he bounced her up and down, stroking her on his shaft. It came to him, sharply, that this was the first time he'd ever made love to her when he controlled the pace and not she. The thought made him adjust the pace to minimize his stimulation while increasing hers to its maximum. As if she sensed his intent, she squirmed in an effort to modify her position and present less of herself to the steady stroking. But she was helpless in Ted's hands and the motion went steadily on.

"Oh! Oh!" Elsie gasped. Her thighs tightened in convulsive but rhythmic squeezes and she snapped the small of her back inward repeatedly in time to the strokes that Ted made.

She clawed at his back and suddenly her even breathing gave way to panting.

"Good God, darling! Faster! Now, NOW!"

Ted felt a tremor go through her. He slowed the stroking and eased her pressure on the ridge of his penis. Her breathing eased and she leaned inward against him.

"Oh, Ted, I wanted to go on! Why did you stop?"

"It ought to be like drinking good wine," he replied. "You don't gulp it all at once. You drink some and let the taste get all through you and then drink some more. That way, you get more of the flavor."

"But darling! I'll lose control of myself!"

"Maybe."

He began to pump her again. She panted and squirmed and got excited once more and her fingernails dug in. Ted watched her neck. Over and over, he saw the cords jerk taut, then relax and he knew that she was still clinging to her self-control. She gritted her teeth, then and leaned away to glare at him.

“Now, darling! Oh, I’ve got to … NOW!”

He held her still, raised enough to relieve her of the pressure from his penis and let her subside.

“Ted! Goddamnit, Ted! What are you doing to me? I wanted to come! I had to come! But you wouldn’t let me!”

“Of course not, sweet! If I had, it’d all be over now. Would you rather?”

“Oh, yes! I mean, no! Oh, Ted, I don’t know what I mean! I’m glad I’m on you right now, but I’m afraid of what I might do—or say—!”

“Easy, doll. Let’s just pretend we’ve found a new dish and don’t want it to disappear too soon.”

“Or a new sensation,” she said. “But I’m still frightened.”

“Not of me, doll.”

“Of course not! Of myself!” She shuddered. “I’ll make you hate me!”

“Not while we’re doing this, you won’t!”

He began to stroke her up and down again. She rose quickly to her former state of excitement and suddenly she threw her head back and burst into a low, undulating cry. Ted gauged his rhythm cautiously, determined not to let her slip into an easy, self-controlled orgasm this time. She was going to let herself go for once, by God, or he’d know the reason why!

He was pleased with her reactions. They verged on the automatic. But there was still a core of reserve that he couldn’t accept. She stiffened sharply and he stopped her motion. The next time, he suspected, she’d forget herself and let go.

"Oh, darling!" she moaned. "I don't know what's happening! Be good to me, Ted! Be good to me!"

"I'll be good to you, doll," he promised.

He pumped again. At the first motion, Elsie gasped and stiffened. Within a half dozen strokes, she began to beat her heels against his buttocks. She started to throw herself backward and forward, clinging to his shoulders as she did.

She threw her head with each backward shove. Suddenly, her hair broke out of its sleek pile and flew loose over her face and shoulders.

"My God!" she cried out in alarm. "My God, Ted! Look what's happened!"

"There, there, pet," he crooned. "It's all right."

Elsie thrashed. Her fingers clawed for a better grip, found it, then abandoned it to find another. Her eyes stared and her mouth gaped. Her legs flailed the air, then tightened on him while she kicked his buttocks. She mouthed incoherent phrases and her lips glistened with saliva.

She's there, Ted thought. She's there! Primitive! Raw sex! Doesn't give a damn how she looks or sounds! Just wants more and more! He stopped her and held her inches away from his body. She trembled violently.

"Ted! Darling! Oh, God, this is good!" She buried her face in the hollow of his neck, then raised it and kissed him in a frenzy of searching.

"I'm ready, precious!" she said. "I'm ready! But I love you for not letting me come yet! Oh, God! It's so good this way!"

She was still wild, he realized. She wasn't going to regain her composed poise. She was simply woman and she'd abandoned herself to him. Even if he lay with her for an hour, until she'd

lost her passion and had to start from the beginning, she'd throw herself into the experience without her net of reserve.

He began to pump her with long, powerful strokes, striking her pelvic arch against his with a crash at the bottom of each stroke.

"Oh my God! Oh, Jesus! Hard, Ted! HARD!"

He quickened the tempo gradually, until his body ached from the exertion and a knot of heat exploded deep in his guts to trigger the first contraction of his own orgasm. But Elsie stiffened at the same time, grinding herself against him and gasping from the intensity of the tremors that shook her.

At last, she quieted and Ted, feeling his hardness melting, staggered to the edge of the desk, where he leaned weakly.

"God, we're sweaty!" exclaimed Elsie. She laughed shakily.

"We sure are!" Ted squeezed her. "I don't know about you, but I feel like my bones have melted!"

"Me too! Even that one you've got in me is soft now!"

"That's the penalty it pays for grabbing the best spot."

"Oh, Ted! What a thing to say!" She giggled.

"I'm likely to say almost anything after something like that."

"You've a right!" She paused with an expression of surprise on her face. "Ted! That's the way you and Rita make love!"

"Not very often, doll. She weighs a bit more than you. We usually look for more support than

just my legs."

"Not that! I don't mean in the position we used! I mean making it last!"

"And last and last," Ted agreed. "That's right, doll. We're not in a hurry to let it end."

"God! And she can take it!" Elsie pressed tightly against him.

"She sure can! It's a three-dimensional experience, doll!"

"And in color with sound effects?" she giggled again. "I don't see how either of you can stand to waste your time with the rest of us."

"What a thing to say! Everyone's different, Elsie!" But he'd fumed over the same thing and he still wished he could figure out how to break off the extra relationships without making Rita think he was jealous. Or letting her know that he was, maybe.

She stirred, then pulled herself off him.

"We have to get back out with the others. But thanks for the lesson, coach."

Ted chuckled. "Thanks, yourself! I feel like a different man!"

* * *

"It wasn't the same Elsie that came out as the one that went in," murmured Rita.

Ted squinted to make her out in the faint light that filtered in through the window. She lay face up, the blanket tucked under her chin, her eyes staring into the darkness. He felt for her hand and cuddled it in his.

"No," he said. "Not the same."

“Ted, I’ve never seen her with her hair down, before!”

“Neither have I.”

“That must have been quite an education she got.”

“Honey!” He squeezed her hand and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

“Did you see the way Bill looked when you two came back?”

“I … Well, I’m not sure that I did.”

“He looked awestruck—as if he couldn’t quite believe what he saw. And then he looked like someone had a knife in him and was twisting it.”

“Oh, no! Honey, he wasn’t upset while we were in the den, was he?”

“Well … no-o-o … I guess not. He was quiet, but he didn’t really look upset.”

“I’d hate it if …”

“Ted?”

“Sure, honey.”

“Let’s not talk about it right now. I just don’t know how he felt.”

“You know? I’ve been thinking about this sharing business. I wonder if …”

“Please! I don’t want to talk about it right now!”

Ted stiffened beside her. “You’re sore because Elsie and I went off by ourselves,” he accused.

"I am not!"

"And that you didn't do anything!"

"I am not!"

"Then why don't you want … ?"

"Oh, Ted! For God's sake, drop it!"

He turned his back on her. Why the hell couldn't he at least suggest that they ought to pull out of the arrangement? Sure, he'd gotten two pieces more out of the thing than she—so far as he knew. Okay! Let her get laid a couple more times! But then knock it off! But no; she didn't want to talk about it. She must know what he wanted to suggest. She wasn't stupid.

He felt miserable. He wasn't going to be able to sleep a wink. Rita probably wouldn't either. She was holding herself so rigid right now that he could feel the covers quiver.

They just didn't fight! Al and Cora would figure the few words they'd just had were routine; they bickered a lot. But he and Rita weren't like that. This sharpness could be serious! He tried to get comfortable. No use. He wondered if he ought to apologize. Hell, he couldn't! He didn't know what to apologize for! But it might help if he just said he was sorry. She wouldn't ask what for. He'd try it.

"Baby?"

Silence.

"Baby?"

Silence.

"Rita?"

A change in the slow tempo of her breathing. Then, “Hmm?”

“I’m sorry, baby.”

“It’s all right.” Flat.

“It’s never quite all right after, baby.”

“It’s all right, Ted.”

Rita rolled toward him and he took her in his arms. She cried and he held her and comforted her. At intervals, he told her he was sorry. And at last she slept. Ted doubted that he would. There was something that wasn’t going to let him. But he couldn’t remember what it was and things began to float as they always did the last few seconds before sleep came.

* * *

At breakfast, Rita offered to reach as many of the mothers on his part of the team roster as she could during the day. “That’ll give you a little head start,” she said.

“Great! That’ll really help!”

“What shall I ask them?”

“Ask what grade the boy got in each subject on his last report card. Check to see if the date of birth we’ve got on the roster is right. And ask if they still live at the address we show.”

“Grades, date of birth and address. Okay.”

When he was ready to leave for work, Ted paused at the door. He took Rita in his arms and held her close.

“I love you, baby,” he told her. He kissed her.

“I hope you always do,” she whispered. She clung to him for a long moment, then pulled free.

“You’ll be late, hon.”

He grinned and went out. It’d be fine if the beautiful morning was going to be an omen.

By nine that evening, the results were in. There were no ineligible players on the Raiders’ roster. Ted smiled and got a beer out of the refrigerator. Whatever problems the association had with Ron and the Broncos, the Raiders were clean. He had a feeling that was going to be important. All of a sudden, Mr. Gale’s awe at the improvement in the team meant something. They were going to win those next two games and go on to the play-off.

He paused to reflect on what that would mean. They’d probably have to play Ron’s Broncos. That’d be all right. No matter what Ron had pulled against any of the other teams, he’d play it straight in the play-off. After all, he’d be playing a team from his own association in front of everyone from the Oakdale area. He couldn’t afford to do it any other way.

Just the same, it might be good insurance to give the boys a few pointers on how to handle the tactics that referees usually didn’t see. But he’d wait until after the game with the Rebels. They were going to put up real resistance, regardless of Gale’s optimism.

Chapter 8

THEY GOT THROUGH THE WEIGH-IN SATurday morning without having anyone disqualified. Ted heaved a sigh of relief and watched the boys as they warmed up. The Rebels went through their warm-ups at the other end of the field smartly and looked good in their scarlet jerseys and gold pants. They appeared to know what they were doing.

The Rebels won the toss and elected to receive the kick-off. The Raiders chose to defend the north goal, starting off with what wind there was at their backs. The kick-off was high and deep and the Raiders covered well, putting the Rebels on the twenty-two yard line for their first offensive play. Ted had expected the first down to produce a dive into the line to feel out the Raiders' strength and that's where it went. Held to a one yard gain, the Rebels tried a sweep on the second down, but Ted's corner-back turned it in and the end and a line-backer dumped it for a yard loss. The Rebels were almost certain to call a pass on third down. If they failed to pick up ten yards, they'd have to punt.

The quarterback pitched put to his flanker, who faked a sweep and threw a pass deep along the visitors' sideline. The receiver was covered and the pass fell incomplete. Ted realized suddenly that John Gale hadn't mentioned how well the Rebels were able to kick. Maybe they hadn't had to in the game Gale saw.

"Bill!"

"Yeah, coach."

"Get those backs deep! We don't know what kind of punter these guys have!"

"Right!"

Bill got the attention of his safeties and they back-pedaled until even Ted was satisfied that they were deep enough. The Rebels got a beautiful kick away, in spite of a hard rush by the Raiders' tackles. The ball spiraled in a high, lazy arc and the Rebels were all over the area when it came down. Bill's safeties let it go, apparently reluctant to risk a fumble. The ball took a bad bounce and was finally downed on the Raiders' thirty yard line. The Raiders' offensive unit went in.

Ted didn't intend to let his team throw the ball during their first series of downs. The quarterback had instructions to run two plays inside left tackle, then one inside the right tackle. The first two ought to suck the Rebel line-backers over toward their right and give the third running room.

The first play went on a short count. The line opened a good hole and Bill's blocking back exploded through it to lay a fine block on the nearest line-backer. Gregg Hansen, Bill's fullback, picked up six yards before converging defensive backs pulled him down.

The second play went on a long count. The hole was there again, but the line-backers converged faster and Gregg was stopped after two yards.

Bill sent in a replacement for the blocking back and the team set up for the third down. The hole on the right side of the line was a wide one and the blocking back knocked his line-backer into another, who was out of position. Gregg skirted the pile-up and gained nine yards to the Raider forty seven yard line.

Ted left the quarterback to his own devices. With the Rebels off balance from the long gain, it might be a good time to try a short pass, but it could look different out on the field.

Micky O'Brien, the quarterback, called an off-tackle cutback. Dana Ross carried the ball into the Rebel backfield and evaded tacklers to pick up a long gain that almost turned into a touchdown. The Rebel safety caught him at their twenty-five yard line, with no other tackler within striking range.

Micky came back on the resulting first and ten with the same play. Dan showed the effects of

his long run, getting nailed hard after picking his way down to the twenty, but he got up briskly.

The next play sent Roger Buckley over right tackle to the fourteen yard line. Ted paced the sideline, scenting a quick touchdown. He stiffened at the attempted sweep that followed. The Rebels went with the flow of the play and threw it for a three yard loss.

"Marston!"

"Yes, sir!"

"In for Wilcox! Tell O'Brien to stick with his power plays!"

"Yes, sir!"

Marston ran for the huddle, shouting Wilcox's name at the top of his voice. Wilcox sprinted for the sidelines, but Micky called a time out to avoid being penalized for spending too much time in the huddle.

Bill growled. "He may wish he had that time out when we get down toward the end of the half!"

Ted nodded. It was a matter of judgment. A touchdown in the next few plays would give the Raiders a big psychological edge over the Rebels. A five yard penalty, added to the three yard loss the Raiders had just suffered, could make that touchdown an idle dream by demoralizing the offense.

The next play went over left tackle to the eleven yard line. The one after that went over the same hole to the six. The next one—fourth down and two yards to go—was an off-tackle power play with two backs preceding the ball carrier through the hole. Gregg went across for the touchdown. Micky called the same play for the extra point and the Raiders went ahead, seven to zero.

The Rebels fumbled the kick-off at their own eight yard line and the Raiders recovered. Two plays later, Dana carried the ball on a cut-back for the second touchdown and then Gregg dived over left guard to pick up the extra point.

Ted shook his head. With a fourteen point lead, four minutes into the first quarter, it began to smell like a rout. He'd watch for signs that the Rebels were folding. If they were, he'd have to pull out his first string and go to his reserves. He had no intention of humiliating a team that had come through so far as a top contender.

But the Rebels found themselves on the following kick-off. There was a confused knot of players at their twelve yard line and it looked like they'd gotten another bad break. Then, suddenly, a scarlet jersey broke for the sideline and raced for fifteen yards before anyone started in pursuit. The Raider safety got over-eager and the runner faked him out at the fifty yard line. From there, it was an easy jog to the goal line and six points for the Rebels.

Ted sent in the defensive unit to stop the Rebels' conversion attempt.

"They made us look like girls on that kick-off return," he remarked before he sent them onto the field. But as the kick-off specialists reached the bench area, he paused to ease their chagrin. "Don't sweat it," he said. "They're entitled to one break."

The defense poured into the Rebel backfield to smother their conversion effort before it got started. And the Raider kick-off return squad took to the field for the first time in the game.

The Rebels kicked deep. Dana, waiting at the twenty for the kick-off, had to drop back to the five to take it and he was dropped at the fifteen.

Micky returned to his brutal attack on the Rebel tackles, averaging four yards per play and grinding out another unspectacular touchdown and extra point. With half the first quarter remaining, Ted squatted on the sideline with Micky while their defense hammered at the Rebels.

"They ought to be tightening up in the middle of the line about now, Micky."

"I think so, coach. We've got some weight on them, thought. We could run through there all day, if we wanted to."

"You don't want to, do you?"

"I'd like to try some passing."

"Go ahead. Mix up your calls and give the guys some practice. They'll need it when we hit the Chiefs next week. But don't give the ball away. Eat it if you have to."

Micky grinned. "Okay, coach."

The Rebels picked up two first downs, then had to punt and Micky led his offensive unit back onto the field. The first play he called was a sweep around the left end. The Rebels reacted quickly, but Roger Buckley cut back and gained four yards to the Raiders' forty yard line.

The second play opened to look like the first. The Rebels moved faster and hemmed in the sweeping blockers, but Roger stopped short, set himself and lobbed a pass back across the field to the split end, who had drifted downfield and was wide open. Ted groaned as Stein loped down the sideline for another score. Across the field, one of the assistant coaches threw his cap on the ground and jumped up and down on it. The stands were quiet as the Raiders made the extra point to make the score twenty-eight to six.

The Rebels' offense came apart on the first down after the kick-off. They let Ted's defensive unit through and fumbled in the resulting mix-up. Ted turned to Micky.

"I'm going to give your squad a rest, Micky. It's time to use the blue squad." He raised his voice. "Blue offense! Move it!"

The second string offense took over. Tom Cord, Micky's understudy as quarterback, felt out the Rebels' line with two power plays, gaining six yards on the first and five on the second. With a first and ten, he switched to passes. Tom liked to throw the ball himself, rather than

giving it to one of the other backs and he struck his receivers three times in a row, picking up twelve yards, seventeen yards and a touchdown on the three plays. He passed for the extra point to add insult to injury.

"Blue defense after the kick-off!" called Ted. "And when we get the ball next time, we'll run the white offense."

The blue defense held the Rebels better than the first string golds had. And the white offense, the kids who got to play four or five downs per game most of the year, pushed their way through the scarlet jerseys of the Rebels as if they'd been playing full time every game. Ted allowed them to increase the score to forty-two to six and the first quarter ended.

During the kick-off, he gathered the team around himself.

"I don't want any more scores," he told them. "I don't care what you have to do, but don't cross that goal line. I'll send someone in with the word when I want you to fumble. Okay?"

There was a loud chorus of protests, but the boys began to see the point and nodded. All three offensive units got to work out during the second quarter and they all moved readily against the Rebels. But invariably, about the time they got inside the Rebels' twenty yard line, they developed fumble-itis and lost the ball.

During the halftime intermission, Ted made a brief speech to the relaxed boys.

"You've turned in a good performance so far," he said. "That early touchdown and the bad break—for the Rebels—that gave us the second one right on top of it and probably knocked the heart out of those kids. They're not the lousy team they looked like in the first half. If we let ourselves get cocky enough, they could still pull this one out of the fire. I want you to start out the second half as if it were a new game. Hit hard and play it cool. Don't take chances."

He left them to their oranges and went out to the stands, where Rita waited for him.

"This is awful, Ted!"

“It’s been something of a shock,” he admitted. “Some of the fathers are upset.”

“About what?”

“They’re saying you’re sending in bad plays.”

“Hell, I’m not sending in any plays at all until we get inside their twenty!”

“That’s what they’re talking about. Every time you send in a play, the kids lose the ball on a fumble!”

Ted laughed softly. “That’s the play I send in, baby.”

“What do you mean?”

“We don’t want to score. So when it looks like we might, I send someone in to call a fumble! Okay?”

Rita looked horrified. “Is that legal?”

Ted shrugged. “We haven’t drawn a penalty for it. Of course it’s legal! If you want to turn the ball over to the other side, there’s no rule to stop you!”

She shook her head and her expression got soft.

“Honey?”

“Yeah?”

She hesitated. “Honey, after the game, let me go back to the van with you. You’re so thoughtful you deserve your own treat.” Her voice was so low that Ted had to strain to hear her.

He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “Thanks, baby. You’re on.”

A whistle blew and it was time for the second half to start. Ted squeezed Rita’s shoulder again and returned to the home team benches.

The Rebels kicked off to the Raiders. Ted watched with growing surprise as Dana got swarmed under on his own seven yard line. The gold offensive unit formed behind the ball and Micky ran them at the left tackle hole. There was no hole and Gregg went down on the eight. The next play was at the same spot. The Rebels gave, but grudgingly and the ball was spotted on the eleven. The third play went over right tackle for two more yards and Ted sent out his punter.

McDaniel’s got a bad pass from center, rushed the kick and got off a high, wobbly floater. The Rebels called for a fair catch on the Raiders’ thirty, where they took over with a first and ten.

“What’s happening out there, Micky?” Ted asked his quarterback. “Are we letting down?”

Micky shook his head. “The Rebels came alive, coach. They aren’t afraid of us now.”

“Hm. Well, it looks like we’d better stick with the game plan we started the game with. Get your offense over here. I want to talk to them for a minute.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ted squatted in the middle of the offensive unit. “Look, guys. The Rebels spent the first half feeling us out.”

There was a gust of laughter.

“They’re ready to play, now. They’re going to make it a football game. I’m still not interested in running up the score, but I don’t want to look like the weaker team, either. Don’t let down. Hit with all you’ve got. Understand?”

“Right, coach!” They all nodded with approval.

The Rebels passed. Their line provided protection for the quarterback and their receivers mixed their patterns well enough to complete eight passes in succession, scoring on a throw to the flat. But they failed again to convert.

The remainder of the half demanded everything the Raiders had. The gold and blue squads showed little difference in effectiveness, but the only action the boys on the white squad saw was through individual substitutions. But it was one of these boys who provided the last touchdown of the day. He went out on a deep pass pattern, bobbled the ball on his fingertips for five yards before he could pull it in and ran all the way into the end zone when the defender stumbled and fell.

The final score was forty-nine to twelve. Ted shook hands with the opposing coach, surprised at the other’s enthusiasm.

“Congratulations, coach!” the Rebels’ coach said. “I think that’s the hardest hitting team we’ve played all year. But I’m going to forget about the first half. As far as I’m concerned, the whole game was in the second half. You won, seven to six.”

Ted laughed. “What did you do to your kids during halftime?” he asked.

“Boy! That’s a secret I’m keeping for next year!” The other coach studied Ted. “You’ll beat the Chiefs, coach. No problem there, unless you have an off day. But I hear you’ll have to bring an armed guard when you go into the play-off. I’m glad we drew you on our schedule instead of the other Oakdale team.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Bad word out about them. Well, good luck.”

Ted returned to the bench to pick up his equipment bag and Bill and Al walked off the field

with him into the milling crowd of excited parents. For twenty minutes, they were pummeled and shouted at, but they managed at last to work their way through and join the women. As Ted and Rita left the Rosses and the Sharps to go to the van, John Gale and Loren Thompson caught up with them.

"Hi, John! You finally got to see one, didn't you!" Ted grinned at his spotter.

"And I'm glad I did. The Chiefs don't play until this afternoon; I'll be heading over their way pretty quick. I thought you'd be interested in Mr. Thompson's project."

"What project?" asked Ted.

Thompson nodded down at his camera case. "I'm going out to Center City to film the game between the Broncos and the Chargers. They play at two o'clock."

"How long will it take to get the film developed, Loren?"

"Normally takes about eight or ten days, coach. I've worked out special arrangements for this batch. We'll have them back by Wednesday."

"Hey! That's all right! It looks like we're going to have to know about the Broncos." Ted grabbed Thompson's hand.

"It sure does, coach, the way your kids manhandled the Rebels today."

Ted sobered. "I sure can't figure out what happened in that second half!"

"Maybe you can spot something in the film," suggested Gale.

"I hope so!"

Ted and Rita watched John and Loren out of sight, then turned and walked along the fence toward the van.

Chapter 9

RITA STRETCHED ON THE SOFA, COUNTing her sensations. The first was tingling satisfaction. The two and a half hours in the van had been almost like turning back time. There'd been a hunger in Ted for their old ways that matched her own and she wondered where he'd found strength enough to drive home afterward—or to go back out when Jens had called another emergency meeting. The next was the smoothness of the upholstery against the skin on her back and the backs of her legs. Then there was the intimacy of her half-bra, cupped against the swell of the lower sides of her breasts and of the see-through bikini panties, that barely covered the dark patch on her loins. And there was that breath of breeze that eased the late afternoon heat. Overall, was contentment.

Ted would be home sometime. Maybe it'd be another fifteen minutes-or maybe not until the middle of the night—but right now she could relax, almost naked and wait.

She heard the door open. There he was! Then someone called out.

"Hey! Anybody home?"

She panicked in the instant of confusion before she recognized the voice. "Bill?"

"Yeah. Someone is home."

"Elsie with you?"

"No. She sent me by myself."

"Oh." She wanted to cover herself—to make a dash for the bedroom and a shift or something. But she'd have to pass Bill on the way. It wasn't as if he hadn't seen her this way before-more

of her, in fact-but she hadn't been alone with him then.

"Hey! Aren't you going to tell me to come on in?"

"Oh, Bill! I'm sorry! Of course!"

She tensed as she waited for him, then smiled at the way his eyes widened.

"Whew!" He whistled and stared. "God, you look sexy!"

"That's what Ted says," Rita replied. "Have a beer?"

"Sure." He went to the refrigerator and returned with the can in his hand. He dropped into an easy chair.

"Christ! I wish Elsie'd lie around the house like that!"

"Tell her so; she might. You say she sent you over by yourself?"

"Well yeah." He looked uncomfortable. "Yeah … in a way. Where's Ted?"

"Jens Jensen called another emergency meeting this afternoon. He didn't say how long it'd take."

"Oh. Well … I wanted to ask Ted … Aw, hell! The fact is, you might be able to tell me more than Ted could."

"About what?"

"You remember how Elsie looked when she and Ted came out of the den the other night?"

Rita nodded. "Yes, I do."

"I don't know what the hell Ted did to her in there, but she's sure different! Goddamnit, Rita! I've made love to you! Is Ted that much better? What secret technique does he use that I haven't heard of?"

"Oh, Ted? Come on, Bill! There's no secret!

"Well, there's sure as hell something different!"

"Y-y-yes. There's something different. You really want to know?"

"Of course!"

"He just made her wait, Bill."

"Made her wait! What do you mean?"

"Well, the times we've … well … all made love in the same room, Elsie would let herself get worked up just so far. Then she'd take charge and force things into a real quick climax. She never lost her self-control."

Bill grinned. "Yeah. She'd come through a screwing without a hair out of place.

"Bill!"

He shook his head. "That was before. She doesn't now!"

"She doesn't?"

"Never mind. What about this waiting thing?"

"Look, Bill. When I'm ready to come, I want to come! If I can make Ted keep on whatever he's doing, it happens fast. But if he stops and gives me a few seconds to recover, we have all the fun of getting there again. Only he likes to do that a whole lot of times."

“No kidding?”

Rita shivered. “Things keep getting more intense every time. I go wild!”

“I don’t know how the hell I’d wait, myself!”

“You’d probably have to work it so whatever you did wasn’t too damn exciting to you.”

“I don’t know …” He eyed her with a speculative expression. “Look, Rita, would you … I mean, would you mind if … Goddamnit! Would you help me figure out what you’re saying?”

“You want a demonstration?”

“Hell, no! A lesson!”

“On me?!”

“Well, I …”

“I don’t know whether I can, even if I want to. I spent two and a half hours with Ted, this morning.”

“Two and a half hours!”

She nodded. Bill looked dejected and she felt a surge of sympathy.

“Bill?”

“Hmm?”

“Try me, Bill. I’ll do my best. Maybe you can get the idea, even if I can’t go all the way.”

"You're sure you want to? After all, two and a half hours … !"

"Go ahead."

She stood. It took a moment of concentrated effort to unhook her bra, but it came loose and she lowered it slowly and laid it aside. Bill swallowed. She leaned down to push her panties off, prolonging the action when she realized that Bill's reaction was stimulating her. She lifted her feet out of them and laid the wisp of nylon on top of her bra. She lay back on the sofa, then sat up.

"Here, Bill?" she asked. "Or do you want me to come over there?"

"Where you are," he said. His voice was thick.

He got up and came to her side, sitting on the edge of the sofa. He played with her breasts with both hands, tugging gently at her nipples and rolling them between his fingers.

"Hey, baby! They're puckering!"

"I know! Ooh! It does feel good!"

Bill chuckled. He bent over her to suck one nipple into his mouth and tease it with his tongue. Rita tensed at the tingle that rippled through her. She placed her thumb on the upper curve of her breast and her fingers on the lower surface and squeezed toward Bill's mouth, as she had when Teddy was nursing.

Bill stroked her lower abdomen with his finger tips, moving them in wide circles and raising gooseflesh over her entire body. She felt the circles approach her loins and sucked in her belly, waiting for the moment when he should touch her genitals.

"Ooh! Bill! It's going to work!"

"It's not just going to be a dry run?"

“Oh, no! It’s going to be for real!”

“I feel better.”

He returned to his mouth-teasing of her nipples and his fingers brushed through her hair to the soft tissues between her thighs. She thrust her knees apart and wiggled her hips. Bill was touching her clitoris-rotating it slowly in tiny circles. Her chest felt constricted and she had to gulp for air.

Hot eagerness welled up in her and long before she expected it, she felt herself on the verge of an orgasm. She seized Bill’s wrist with both hands and pushed his hand away from her throbbing clitoris.

“Wait!” she cried. “Bill, wait! I’ll come if you don’t!”

“But you said you wouldn’t be able to stop when you got there-that Ted had to make you stop!”

“Oh …! Oh …! Bill!” she panted. The urgency subsided slowly. “Yes! But we’ve been making love this way for a long time. I’ve learned—trained myself a little bit. I can stop him the first time or two. But he watches me and when he sees I’m starting to come, he stops me and makes me calm down before we go on.” She breathed deeply. “You can start again, now.”

Bill dipped his fingers to the mouth of her vagina and covered them with her fluid, then scooped it up onto her clitoris. She soon lost the ability to tell just what he was doing. She could only tell that the area around her vulva was jamming her nervous system with signals of lust and frenzy. She forgot herself and knew dimly that her body was tossing under Bill’s stimulation. A tremor started, deep in her belly, where she felt the emptiness that needed filling. She stiffened and cried out and the tremor spread.

Bill withdrew his hand from the excited flesh and held her in his arms. He kissed her and whispered to her while the tremor receded and her body relaxed.

“God, Bill! You caught me just in time!”

“I did? For a second, I thought I’d waited too long. I was afraid you were already into it.”

She shook her head, then caught his chin gently between her teeth. He leaned back and stared at her. She smiled.

“You learned fast,” she murmured.

“I know what you meant, now,” he said.

Good, she thought. He’ll stop and go home. He’ll undress Elsie and spend the rest of the day experimenting. But he didn’t stop. His fingers were once more at her clitoris.

“Bill!” she protested. She gasped and her back arched. “Oh, Bill! Wait!”

“Not now, baby.”

His fingers worked quickly and smoothly and she began to thrash about, held securely about the waist by his other arm. She tried to reach his hand to push it away, but she could not get her own hands past his body. She moaned as the heat raged inside her. She felt the tremor rise again and she clamped her knees together and pushed her body off the sofa, her weight supported by her heels and her shoulders. She felt herself go rigid and the tremor shook her and heat exploded through her.

There was a moment of sudden grayness and she let out her breath in a tremulous sigh and fell back to the sofa.

“Oh, Bill … Oh, Bill …” She opened her eyes and stared tenderly into his face. “You let me go too far, that time, Bill.”

He shook his head. “No. I didn’t want to leave you hanging.”

“But you didn’t come with me! Go ahead. Put him in and come, Bill.”

“Not now, baby.”

“But it isn’t fair to you!”

“Elsie’s waiting. If you’re all right, I’m going home to her. I want to spend an hour or two like this with her.”

“Oh. Of course! Go, Bill! Make her be a wild woman!”

He grinned. “You’re damn right!” He bent down and kissed her. “Thanks for the lesson, baby. Maybe you should have been a teacher. You’ve got the best kind of teaching aids.”

“Oh, Bill! Get out of here!”

When he’d slammed the door, she showered and again dressed herself in the bra and bikini panties. She thought of Ted and more hours with him to night. Should she mention Bill? Probably. After all, Ted was still one ahead of her, if she were to keep score.

* * *

Ted squirmed in his seat, hoping there might be some position that would be comfortable. Jens had his elbows on the table and his chin in his hands. Wilson-Jerry Wilson-paced the length of the room, his hands clasped behind his back. Ron slouched on his tailbone, his feet propped up on the edge of the table.

“Run it through again,” Jens said. “Go slow.”

“All right.” Jerry stopped beside the table. “The Raiders are clean. Three of the boys started the season without birth certificates-we went on the strength of their baptismal certificates while we waited for them to get the official record-but their birth certificates are available now and

they confirm the ages we had."

"So Ted's got no ineligible players." Jens glanced at Ted with an expression that Ted thought was almost one of gratitude.

"Right."

"And the Broncos?"

"All clean but one. That is, the federation finally gave me the names of the two boys that were being challenged. One is too old and he isn't even on the roster." Jerry shot a quick glance at Ted out of the corner of his eyes. "The other … well, there was a question as to his age, too. I've got his birth certificate here in the file and it shows he's eligible. I'll keep it on hand until the season's over."

Jens raised his head. "The kid's parents don't mind having someone hang onto the certificate?"

"Well … no."

"What's the boy's name?"

"Hershel. Charley Hershel. Tackle."

Jens straightened in his chair. "Then it's like you said. The federation hasn't anything to complain about as far as eligibility goes."

"That's right. And the heat's going to be off any way. After today's game, Ted's Raiders are a cinch to make it to the play-off. It'll be the two Oakdale teams squaring off at each other. There aren't going to be any protests in that game." He stared hard at Ted. "Are there, Brown?"

"I don't expect there'll be anything to protest," Ted replied.

"That about wraps it up, doesn't it?" remarked Ron. "Incidentally, Ted. Who's going to get your 'most valuable player' award this year?"

Ted shrugged. "I don't know."

"You know who you're considering. Which guys are at the top of the list?"

"I haven't rated them. I'm not going to, until after the last game. We just don't have any outstanding individuals, Ron." He'd be damned if he'd put his finger on any one of his kids. The top two Charger backs had been hurt seriously in today's game against Ron's Broncos. To Ron, it was simply another of those breaks of the game—of a sixty-three to nothing game on the way to the play-off.

"It doesn't sound like you take the award very seriously," commented Ron.

Ted stared at him through narrowed eyes. "I take it seriously," he said quietly. "I take the kids' health seriously, too. I don't have any stars, Ron."

"Is that a crack, Ted?" asked Jerry.

"I guess so. Ron's got nine to his credit, now. He's not getting any of mine if I can help it."

"That's a strong accusation, Ted," suggested Jens.

Ted felt tight inside. "I want one thing understood. My kids have come through their games without a single bad injury. If Ron and I do meet in the play-off, my parents are going to film the whole game from four angles. And if there is an injury, we're going to be in a position to see how it happened." He turned to Ron. "Is that clear?"

Ron smiled sleepily. "I guess I'm simple. I don't know what you're talking about."

But outside, after they left the room, Ron stopped Ted. "I wouldn't be too eager to push that

film bit if I were you, Ted. The way you and your assistant coaches have been screwing each other's women, you ought to be keeping real quiet. Can you imagine what the kids on your team would say if they knew?"

"Is that a threat, Ron? Seems to me you're not in a position to shoot off your mouth."

"So what would you say? 'So did he!' isn't going to make you look any better."

"You haven't any ethics at all, have you, Ron!"

"Sure! Don't do anything that hurts your chances of winning! What other kind of ethics make sense?"

Ted balled his fists and walked away from Ron.

Chapter 10

JOHN GALE GOT TO THE HOUSE JUST AS Ted and Rita finished their supper. Rita dashed for the bedroom to put on some clothes while Ted answered the door.

"Come in, John. We'll have some coffee. How'd the Chiefs do?"

"They won. Eighteen to seven over the Packers."

"Let's see. That's pretty close to the score in our game with the Packers. Didn't we take them twenty-one to seven?"

John nodded. "You know? I was thinking this afternoon. The Raiders haven't missed an extra point all season!"

"That could make the difference in a close game," said Ted.

"It could," agreed John. He grinned. "You're not going to have any more close games this year."

"I'm not?"

"Not after what I saw this morning. Coach, those kids of yours are frightening!"

"Frightening? They frightened me in the second half!"

"Well … yeah … Something happened to them. Anyhow, here's the story on the Chiefs."

And when Ted had digested the report on the Chiefs, he knew that next Saturday's game would not be close. The Chiefs depended on their ground game. They ran the ball, favoring

wide end sweeps. The few passes they attempted were wasted effort. They had no receivers who could either run fast enough to outdistance the defense or fake well enough to shake them. And their own defense consisted of an eight or nine man line with two or three safeties. In the game with the Packers, they had overpowered the Packer line, smothering the pass plays which would otherwise have beaten them. But he knew the weakness of that Packer line.

Monday's practice followed the pattern set the previous week. Little was said about the second half against the Rebels, but Ted overhead remarks among the boys that indicated the queasy feeling they'd had by half time. Teddy expressed it for the team to Rita, who passed his comment on to Ted.

"He said they got to asking themselves how they'd feel to look so awful in front of their folks after that long drive over to Oakdale. Especially after the way the Rebels' center cried when he let them through to the quarterback." She rubbed her cheek against Ted's shoulder and fingered his jaw. "The kids you've turned out with this team are something special, honey. Tough and hard—and sentimental!"

* * *

Loren Thompson was as good as his word. Ted and Bill and Al drove to the Thompson house together Wednesday night to view the films of the Bronco Charger game. The Chargers had kicked off to Ron's Broncos. After a short runback, the Broncos put the ball in play at their own twenty three yard line. Two running plays moved them to the twenty-seven, with the Charger middle linebacker making the first tackle and assisting on the second. The third play was an attempted pass, which the same boy broke up by blitzing. The punt on the fourth down was a good one and the Chargers returned it only to their own thirty.

On the Chargers' first offensive play, their quarterback rolled out to the left and handed off to the flanker. Ignoring the ball carrier, three Broncos hit the quarterback after he'd gotten rid of the ball. Charley Hershel got to him first, hitting him in the small of the back with his shoulder, moving in at a dead run. The Broncos' right defensive end came in from the side with his forearm up to catch the quarterback in the throat as he started to fall forward.

Another player leaped on the fallen boy's side with his knee.

Thompson stopped the projector and reversed it.

"Mind if I run that back in slow motion, coach?" he asked.

"You filmed this game in slow motion?!" Ted gasped at the thought of what the film must have cost. Then he remembered Thompson's position in the community. He could afford the film for something he considered worth it.

The play unfolded in the dream-like display of grace of slow motion. With his telephoto lens, Loren had caught the quarterback wheeling away from the center with the ball in his outstretched hands, taking five floating strides back and to his left and reaching far out toward his accelerating flanker. There was no deception and the flanker's grace and bunched power was a clear tip-off as to the reason. On this play, the Chargers didn't need to fool the opponent: they'd run over him.

The quarterback stopped in two more steps, arresting his forward motion with pogo-stick type hops as he rotated his body to the left—his back to the line—and watched the flanker gather blockers. A yellow jersey loomed into the frame, shoulders pumping and helmet aimed at the now motionless quarterback. A shoulder connected with the white jersey, just above the top of the pants and the quarterback's arms left his sides to float upward over his head and back. His feet left the ground and he pitched slowly forward.

A second gold jersey closed with the white figure. The face of the approaching player showed above his raised forearm. Through his face-guard, his eyes were fixed steadily on his target, with an expression of fierce pleasure. Ted watched the forearm laid like a bar across the exposed throat and the awful forward snap of the white-helmeted head. The third impact came so late that it seemed impossible that the officials could have allowed it and Ted gagged as he watched the knee drive downward into the side of the writhing figure on the ground.

Thompson stopped the film again for a moment. "Coach, I'd call that scene enlightening."

“My God!” breathed Bill. “That was a cold blooded execution!”

“I checked today,” replied Loren. “He’s still in the hospital-and still listed as serious. So is that flanker you were looking at.”

“Was he the other injury?”

“Yeah. You’ll see it in a couple of plays. The flanker played both offense and defense. He was that tough middle line-backer that broke up Ron’s first set of downs. The Chargers’ star—until Saturday.” Loren started the projector at normal speed.

The next play opened with the replacement quarterback faking a handoff to the flanker, who charged out to his right, then handing the ball to the fullback, who ran it over his own left tackle. The empty-handed flanker charged hard for a half dozen steps, then slowed and straightened up. Hershel threw off his blocker, brushed past the charging fullback and followed the flanker. As the latter slowed and straightened, Hershel dropped his shoulder and drove it into the boy’s back. Another gold jersey converged on the scene to club the falling back with his elbow. Again, Loren reran the scene in slow motion and they saw that the second Bronco was a line-backer, who fixed a collision course for the flanker through the opening weak side of the Charger line.

“That’s almost hard to believe,” whispered Ted. Suddenly he straightened. “Back that up, Loren!”

Loren backed the film and reran it, showing the flanker going down for the third time.

Ted left his breath out slowly. “Is that a number eighty-three on that line-backer’s jersey?”

“Yes, it is,” Loren replied. “I already jotted down the player numbers from these two plays.”

The rest of the film showed a rough, dirty foot ball game, with the gold jerseys scoring at will against a demoralized white team, but there were no more players deliberately crippled. The officials appeared to have done their best. The Broncos were repeatedly penalized. Short of

stopping the game and awarding it to the Chargers, no two men could have done any more. But the film revealed countless cases of holding and kneeing and tripping and elbowing that neither official could have seen.

At the end of the showing, Bill turned to Ted. "What are you going to do, Ted?"

"I don't know, Bill. I just don't know."

"Boy!" Bill put his face in his hands and his voice was muffled. 'I'm not going to put my kids up against that kind of tactics."

Ted had a mental picture of Dana in the place of the flanker and knew that Bill saw it too. "I agree, Bill. We aren't going to go into that game until we have this thing settled."

"My God, boss coach!" Al sounded awed. "I've watched special film clippings on dirty play in pro games, but I've never seen anything anymore brutal than this!"

Loren nodded. "My boy isn't going to play in the game against the Broncos unless there's an answer to this kind of thing." He continued rewinding the film.

"Look, Loren," said Ted. "I'd like to look at the first eight or ten plays again. Okay?"

"Sure. As soon as I finish rewinding."

As the screen came to life again, Ted scanned the Bronco offensive unit, looking for number eighty-three.

"Hold it, Loren!"

Loren stopped the projector.

"Run that play again-slow motion."

Loren backed the film up, then put it into forward in slow motion. It was the Broncos' third play, where they'd attempted to pass.

"Watch the tight end-number eighty-three," Ted told Bill and Al. "See if you can make out his face."

As the play developed, they watched the tight end take two steps across the line and flare out, coming toward the camera. Then the lens zoomed in to pick up the charging line-backer as he descended on the Broncos' quarterback.

"Could you see his face?" asked Ted.

"Yeah. It was pretty clear just before the camera lost him," said Al.

"Recognize him?"

"Tough with that helmet and face-guard, boss coach."

"Run it again, Loren."

Loren gave Ted a speculative glance and reran the play, still in slow motion.

"Look close," Ted said.

"Hmm … can't quite … Hey! That's Darryl Strong!" Al jumped forward to get a closer look. "Sure as the devil!"

"You're sure?"

"Ted, I used to have nightmares about that kid last year. I knew we'd run into him at the end of the season. You bet I'm sure!"

"Do you remember Mike Terrence?"

"Terrence? Terrence? He wasn't out last year."

"No, but do you remember him?"

"Yeah. He's one of the kids we decided we couldn't use this fall. It was his first try at football and he just didn't have the coordination to protect himself."

"That's right," said Bill. "I remember him. He was part of the common draft pool. I remember him because he tried too hard and screwed up so often. Ron finally picked him up, I think." He stopped and his eyes widened. "Do you have a copy of Ron's roster, Loren?"

"It's in the association schedule, isn't it?" asked Loren.

"Yeah."

"Okay. There's a copy of the schedule on that little table over there."

Bill got the schedule and studied Ron's roster. "Number eighty-three-Mike Terrence!" He stared at Ted. "That kid in the film isn't Terrence! Mike's black!"

Ted grinned slowly. "That's right, coach. Mike's black."

Al whistled. "Now what are you going to do, boss coach?"

"I'm going to ask Loren for the loan of these films and his projector, first."

"You've got 'em, coach!" Loren said.

"And then we're going to hold a council of war at my house … you and Bill and I."

"There's nothing more that I can do, coach," said Loren. "You won't need me, will you?"

“No. Not tonight. I may need you later, though, to swear that you took these films.”

“Of course! Any time!”

Outside, Ted suggested that Bill and Al pick up their wives and bring them along.

Bill started to laugh. “Thinking about games after the meeting, Ted?”

Ted shook his head. “Not tonight. But I think we need a big helping of feminine intuition in this conference.”

“Okay, boss coach.”

A half hour later, the three couples huddled over Ted and Rita’s dining room table. Ted quickly explained that they had a decision to reach relative to Ron’s tactics.

“I’ve already told Rita what we saw on the film. You two told Elsie and Cora, I suppose.”

“Sure!”

“Of course!”

“Okay. There was an emergency meeting on player eligibility and game injuries Saturday, with Hensen and Wilson and Ron and me. At the end of the meeting, I told them there’d damn well better not be any bad injuries in that play-off game.”

“Good enough,” growled Al.

“Ron left with me when the meeting broke up. You all remember the spaghetti dinner.”

Cora shivered. “And he turned out to be a filthy brute! I should never have asked Elsie to invite him!”

“Well, Ron remembers it too. He hinted that he’d spread that story if we made any trouble for him.”

“That dirty, blackmailing bastard!” exclaimed Al.

“He’d do it!” Cora said.

Ted agreed. “I believe he would. So do we pretend not to have seen the films?”

Bill tightened his lips and shook his head. “I know one thing for sure! I’m not going to set Dana up like a duck in a shooting gallery. Not if I have to bench him for that game!”

“And Al’s not going to put Mark out there and I’m not laying Ted Jr., open to Ron’s firing squad. Okay. We’re the coaches. We’re not going to expose any of our kids to that kind of thing, are we!”

“Hell, no!” Bill scowled.

“How do we protect them?” Ted asked quietly.

“Bill, we can’t let the kids know that …!” Elsie choked off her sentence, her voice full of panic.

Ted drew a deep breath. He had a moment of fury when he realized how shaky it sounded as it went in. “Maybe we’ve got to introduce us to ourselves. Is there anyone here who’s a goddamn liar?”

Head shakes around the table.

“Then we’re all going to face our kids with the fact we’ve had a round robin screwing party going all season.”

A stunned silence, then a chorus of objections.

“All right. I agree. We’re not going to do that. Meet six goddamn liars!”

“Ted!” Rita’s wail was full of pain.

Ted felt terribly tired. He kept his voice low. “Look. We’re honest people. We don’t lie or steal. We keep the promises we make. We teach our kids to obey the law. But we figured there were some laws that violated our personal rights-laws that butted into areas that were our own business and had nothing to do with anyone else. We decided we’d make up our own minds about our personal relationships. Right?”

Nods.

“Do we still feel that way?”

Silence.

“But we’re not about to tell the kids, are we?”

Vigorous denial.

“There’s only one thing we can do.”

“What’s that?” whispered Elsie.

“Blow this thing wide open for Ron before he knows what’s happening. When he starts shooting off his mouth about us afterward, we let everyone think he’s making up the story for revenge.”

Bill sighed. “Label the sonovabitch a liar!”

“Right! And go ahead and be the liars that we are by using the opportunity to show the kids what depths a person with Ron’s character can sink to. Be self-righteous, sanctimonious bastards, ourselves.”

"And vomit when no one's looking," added Elsie.

"I'm afraid so," muttered Ted.

Cora straightened in her chair and glared round the table. "I don't make speeches," she said.

She's right, thought Ted. She does, rather than talking.

"I don't make speeches," she repeated, "but I've got something I've got to say. I love Al more than anyone else in the world. I can't remember either of my parents and I hated every set of foster parents I had. But Al's been good to me and I love him. I love you other two guys, too. In a way, you make up for love I didn't get as a kid. I like you to screw me." She paused for breath and raised her chin.

Ted held his breath as he waited for her to continue. There was a note of strength and self respect in her tone that he hadn't been able to put into his.

She went on. "I don't feel a goddamn bit guilty about what Ted suggested. I'm not very smart and I've always tried to live by the rule that you don't hurt other people. Period. You don't hurt other people. If you try to, you get it in the neck. We didn't hurt anyone. Ron did-lots of people like those kids and their parents. He's got it coming to him! I'm not going to lose one hour's sleep over it!" She leaned back, her jaw set.

By God, I wish I felt that way, thought Ted. It feels right; it just doesn't fit the goddamn code I grew up with.

There was a long silence. At last, Bill cleared his throat. "Just how are we going to spring this trap on friend Demming, Ted?"

"Well …" Ted pondered the question. "The association board of directors is going to have to take formal action, or else the federation."

“Right.”

“And they’re going to have to take the action before Ron has a chance to spread his stories.”

“Right.”

“They’re going to have to be mad as hell to make an announcement before notifying Ron.”

“Right again.”

“I think this is what we’ll have to do.”

Chapter 11

THERE WERE SEVEN MEMBERS OF THE board of directors for the Oakdale association: president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, player agent, finance director and equipment manager. Ted telephoned each of the seven the next day and arranged with them to be at his house at seven thirty in the evening for coffee and dessert and a special football film. He gave them no hint as to the nature of the film, but let them know that even one day's delay would be quite unfortunate. Nor did he mention that the full board was being invited.

Rita's special coffee cake took the edge off the surprise of finding that Ted had managed to stage an unscheduled board meeting and he got the film going immediately.

There was an ominous silence as Ted switched projector speed to slow motion for the down in which the Charger quarterback was taken out and it continued as he allowed the projector to continue through the next play without returning it to regular speed. Then Jerry Wilson asked him to run the two plays again.

"Who's eighty-three?" asked Jerry. "His face doesn't show up in this sequence."

"Wait. I'll pick up a play where it does." Ted rewound the film until he could show the broken up pass play.

Jerry studied the tight end. "That sonovabitch!" he said. "He lied to me! Demming lied and Darryl Strong lied and the Terrence kid lied!"

"How do you know?" asked Jens.

Jerry snorted. "I know Strong! But number eighty-three on Ron's roster is Mike Terrence. The Terrence's were the couple who asked you how you could be sure Ted hadn't shown

prejudice when he refused to pick up their kid."

"Oh!" exclaimed Jens. "Colored couple! And I showed them that nineteen of his thirty-five boys were black!"

"That's right. Run that play again, Ted and let Jens see for himself."

"You don't have to. Eighty-three was white in the film," Jens said. "What do you suppose made the Terrence kid lie to you?"

Jerry shrugged. His expression had the ugly look of lust for revenge. "Ron either bribed him or scared the hell out of him some way." He hunched down in his chair. "I'll sure as hell find out!"

Jens said, "We've seen enough, Ted. You can put away the projector for right now. How did you get this film?"

Ted explained.

"Then you have films of all the games your team has played this year too?"

"Yes, sir."

"And we can view them if anyone wants to know whether your kids play dirty."

"Absolutely!"

Jens scanned the angry faces about him. "Gentlemen, I declare that the association board of directors is now in formal session. The subject of the meeting is action on direct evidence of unacceptable coaching practices. Mr. Secretary, will you take notes, please?"

"I need some paper, Ted," the secretary said.

Ted handed him a tablet.

Jerry Wilson rose to his feet. “Mr. President?”

“Go ahead, Jerry.”

“I move that the board take the following action: First, remove Ron Demming from any and all coaching duties effective right now; second, in form the federation of this action and forfeit all games that the Broncos have played this year; third, call Wes Burns of the Metropolitan Herald Express and give him an official statement-tonight; fourth, call a special board meeting for eight o’clock tomorrow night and direct Ron Demming and the Strong’s and the Terrence’s to be there.”

“I second the motion,” said the vice-president.

“Did you get that down?” Jens asked the secretary.

“Got it.”

“Discussion?” Jens suggested.

No one spoke. Jens turned to Jerry. “What about the other boy the federation questioned?”

Jerry frowned. “Ron brought me that kid’s birth certificate. I’ll take it back to the kid’s parents. I don’t need it, now.”

“If there’s no discussion, well have a vote on that motion. Would you read it back to us, Mr. Secretary?”

The secretary read the motion.

“All those in favor, say aye.”

There was a chorus of aye's.

"All those opposed, say no."

Silence.

"The motion is unanimously approved," announced Jens. "The secretary is directed to prepare a letter to the federation tonight for my signature. I'll deliver it to Don Beam personally in the morning. Jerry, why don't you call Wes Burns right now?" He glanced at the secretary. "Harlan, make a note that Jerry's to call Ron and the Terrence's and the Strong's tomorrow about that special meeting."

"Right, Jens."

"Is there any further business to be discussed?" asked Jens.

"Who'll the Raiders be playing in the play-off?" asked someone.

"With the Broncos disqualified-and all their games forfeited-the Saints are undefeated. The two guys that got hurt during their game against Ron's kids are back in action again." Jerry grinned at Ted. "They ought to have a special place in their hearts for Oakdale."

Jens looked up sharply. "That's right! They're going to be looking for blood! Jerry, get hold of their coach and lay this whole story out for him. I don't want that play-off to turn into a grudge battle."

Harlan Jones pushed aside his minutes. "Ted, do you think you can get the Saints' last game on film? The one they're scheduled to play day after tomorrow?"

"Probably."

"Look. Would you be willing to let them see any of your game films? It might put a good taste in their mouths."

"Sure! I'm not going to let them see all of them, but they can see any two games they want to."

"Any two? They can make their own choice?"

"Right."

Jens nodded his approval. "Good thought, Harlan. Jerry, when you talk to the Saints' coach, give him Ted's offer." He paused abruptly. "You don't want him to see that game against the Rebels, do you Ted?"

"Why not?"

"Because it was such a rout!"

"So? There wasn't an injury in it. And what's a lot more remarkable, there wasn't a penalty in the first half!"

Jens relaxed and smiled. "All right. I guess you can afford to let him see any of them." He sighed. "There's no further business. The meeting stands adjourned."

When Jerry had finished talking to Wes Burns, who promised to get the statement into Friday's afternoon edition and had left, Ted sagged with relief.

"I don't feel proud of myself," he mused to Rita. "Not a damn bit proud. But I've done what had to be done."

"And we're going to do the rest of what has to be done," she replied firmly.

He studied her. "You buy Cora's code, don't you," he observed.

"Of course! Don't you?"

"I guess I do. But down deep, I'm not comfortable with it."

Rita smiled and touched his hand. "That's one of the things I love you for, darling. You're an idealist."

Ted had trouble sleeping Thursday night and got up Friday morning with an upset stomach. Before night, Ron Demming would know that he'd been drummed out of the associations coaching staff. How soon he'd connect the fact with Ted was problematical, but young Teddy could hear the first hints about the Raider coaches as early as this afternoon. Ted knotted up each time the thought recurred.

But nothing was said Friday or Friday night and there was no evidence Saturday morning before the game with the Chiefs that the boys had heard any rumors.

The Chiefs played better than John Gale had expected. After a scoreless first half, they made a touchdown midway through the third quarter to take a six to nothing lead over the Raiders. It was three minutes into the fourth quarter before the Raiders came back. The Chiefs had possession of the ball and Ted was talking with Micky.

"What's the problem, Micky?"

"I guess we're not up, coach. Everybody knows the Chiefs aren't tough and I think the guys feel embarrassed about Oakdale having to forfeit all of the Broncos' games."

"Okay. Our timing's been off all morning, hasn't it?"

"It sure has! The way we have to wait around for each other we haven't been able to fool em once!"

"Remember the first series of downs against the Rebels?"

"Power plays over tackle?"

“Right.”

“Sure.”

“The next time we get the ball, forget about any other plays. Use that set.”

“Okay. We’ll try.”

The Chiefs ran out of steam and punted from their own forty-eight yard line. Micky’s offensive unit took over on the Raiders’ eleven after a fair catch. The first play gained only two yards. The second, aimed at the same hole, gained six. Mickey gave Gregg a rest by sending Dana at the same hole on a cut-back and it was first and ten on the twenty-four yard line. They switched to the right side of the line.

Twelve plays later, the Raiders scored, with Gregg going over the goal line from nine yards out. Roger went over left guard to make the extra point. And the game ended with the score Raiders seven, Chiefs six.

Even the fans were listless. There were quick, quiet congratulations, but none of the excited re actions that there should have been with a play-off berth locked down. John Gale approached Ted sheepishly.

“I sure didn’t expect an extra point to be important in this game!” he admitted. “We were flat,” Ted said. “The kids were way down today. I think the coaches were, too.” He shook his head. “No. I know we were.”

John put his hand on Ted’s shoulder. “There was some whispering in the stands today, Ted. It’s pretty bad when a guy stoops so low as to spread that kind of lies around.”

“What do you mean?” Alarm coursed through Ted.

“Demming. I guess he figures you were responsible for his getting nailed. He’s trying to get back at you by spreading the worst kind of rumors about you and your staff.”

"What kind of rumors?"

"Aw, you know the stuff that the magazines have been talking about for the last few years wife trading and wild parties and that stuff."

Ted stiffened and fought for breath. He was glad that John had been the first to bring the story to him. He couldn't face a more searching test.

"That kind of rumor?" he whispered.

John nodded. "I don't think any of us realized just what a small person Demming really was. This sure has showed us."

Ted clenched his jaw and swallowed.

"I wouldn't want to butt in, coach, but if I were you I'd ignore the whole thing. No one believes him."

Ted stared silently at John. Then he nodded. "All right, John. I'll take that advice. Thanks."

Afterward, he warned Bill and Al and repeated the conversation he'd had with John.

"If we can make it through the kids' questions, we're okay," he said.

"I doubt that it'll be a matter of questions." Bill studied his toe thoughtfully. "I've a hunch I'll be more like offering them moral support."

Ted nodded. Right now, he needed moral support from Rita.

After dinner that evening, Teddy came to him in the den.

"Dad …"

"Yes, son."

"Dad, I had a little scrap after the game today."

"You?"

"Yes, sir. I belted a guy in the mouth."

"That doesn't generally prove much, Ted."

"No, sir. It made me feel a little better, though."

"What was the problem?"

"Coach Demming. I guess he's been passing lies around about you and Coach Ross and Coach Sharp. Anyhow, the kid who told me didn't believe it, only I didn't find that out 'til after I belted him."

"I'm sorry about that, Teddy. Is he okay now?"

"Yeah. He's got a cut lip, but we got some ice from the snack bar and put it on his mouth to keep it from swelling. Anyhow, the guys are awful mad about the way Coach Demming's lyin'. Even the guys on his team!"

"What makes them so sure he's lying?"

"Because he always lies or cheats. Like the fake birth certificate he got for one of the guys and gave to Mr. Wilson."

Ted gasped. The federation had been right there, too! "Teddy, lying isn't a profitable policy."

"Well, everyone lies sometimes, Dad. There's different kinds."

“It’s better not to lie at all.”

“No it isn’t, Dad. Not always. Some things are more important.”

“Like what?”

“Doing right by people.”

“Oh.”

Ted, Jr., excused himself. He’d taken care of the possibility that someone might report him to his dad for fighting. That obligation out of the way, he had things to do. Ted, Sr., grinned to himself and leaned back in his chair. Perhaps his son’s generation had the pool of reserve strength that his own seemed to have lost. There was something a little awesome about a youngster who could so matter of-factly deny the absolute value of the truth. Awesome and frightening. It was like being cut adrift. He wondered what other fundamental values were different among the youngsters without their parents even being aware of it.

Chapter 12

SUNDAY AFTERNOON, ELSIE AND BILL dropped in for coffee. Dana had heard the rumors about them and discounted them without concern. “Besides,” he’d remarked to Bill, “what of it? Whose business would it be?”

“But I’m not convinced,” Bill admitted. “The kid just isn’t that nonchalant. It’s just that he’s absolutely confident.”

“We think that tells us something,” Elsie added. “We want you to come to another party at our house Saturday night.” She dimpled. “There won’t be any outsiders, because we’re going to talk about what we’ve been doing.”

“Sounds like it could be pretty boring,” commented Ted.

“Could be, but it won’t,” Elsie promised. “Anyhow, not even Dana’s going to have a chance to overhear. He’s leaving on an overnight outing right after the big game.”

“We’ll be there,” Ted assured her.

But after the Rosses left, he had his doubts.

“I don’t like it,” he told Rita. “It’s bad enough lying about what we’ve done without going ahead and doing it some more.”

“You’re not suggesting we stop, are you?”

“Well, yes, I guess I am.”

"Ted!"

"Honey, I tried to suggest it once before-that night when we got mad at each other."

"That's what you were trying to say?"

He nodded. "I suppose I'm old-fashioned as hell, but I … well, I just don't like swapping. I get too goddamn jealous!"

Rita stared at him with an expression of regret. "Ted! Why couldn't you tell me that right at the beginning!"

"Hell, I don't know, I didn't want to ruin your chance for a little variety, I guess."

"I didn't want variety! Oh!" Rita jumped up and ran toward their bedroom.

Ted rose, then thought better of following her. She more than likely needed a little time herself. They'd have to let the Rosses know they couldn't make it to the party.

But Rita disagreed when he mentioned it to her. "We'll go," she said. "We've survived it this long, we're not going to hurt their feelings now. Besides, it's only fair to let them know ahead of time that it's the last time."

Privately, Ted was opposed, but he knew that he wouldn't make an issue of it.

"It'll be a little exciting," Rita remarked in the middle of the week. "Knowing that neither of us buys the idea but doing it anyway, I mean. I think I'll wear something real special!"

Ted groaned. He didn't want someone else taking something real special off Rita, goddamnit! If it was to come off, he wanted to take it off her himself!

But there was little time to sulk. Loren Thompson had managed the same expedited service on the film of the last Saints game-an easy victory over the last place Longhorns—and Ted

and Al and Bill spent hours analyzing their play-off opponents. They saw powerful, conservative football and recognized the fact that they faced their toughest Saturday. The two boys who had been hurt in the game with the Broncos were clearly outstanding.

Still, the Raiders peaked sharply. Their timing was back and they bubbled over with enthusiasm. When game time arrived, they were impossible, pulling pranks on each other and their coaches that would have called for stiff reprimands at any other time.

For the first quarter of the game, there was no apparent advantage with either team. Micky continued for the most part to drive his attack against the opponents' interior line, varying only often enough to keep the Saints from bunching too tight

From the beginning of the second quarter, the tide began to flow for the Raiders. As if the Saints were tiring from the relentless battering, bigger holes appeared and downfield blocking improved. The Raider offensive picked up momentum and the question became not if, but how soon. By the end of the half, the Raiders had built up a two touchdown lead.

Ted was worried about a repetition of the Rebels game and he told the team that he was.

"You didn't play up to capacity in the first half," he said bluntly. "You put more into your practical jokes before the game than you have into the game. Now, this is the last game you'll ever play for this coaching staff. I expect to see a good one. Don't make me ask you again."

The second half was a disaster for the Saints. Before the end of the third quarter, Ted was rotating all three squads and the score was mounting. But the Saints recovered at the end of the quarter, with a thirty-five to zero deficit and the Raiders scored only once in the final quarter.

This time, there was no lack of enthusiasm on the part of the Oakdale fans. The Raiders were mobbed-coaches and players-and they returned the attention with vigor. But eventually the demonstration subsided and the football season was officially over.

Ted alternately fumed and tingled on the way to the Rosses' that night. Rita had promised to

wear 'something special' and she'd kept her word. She had on a wool jersey dress that made him catch his breath. The material was accordion pleated—with narrow, close-set pleats running vertically all the way around—and so soft that it clung indecently. The top was two broad panels that tapered sharply toward her shoulders, meeting at the back of her neck. Her back was bare down to the top of the skirt. In front, the panels covered her breasts but left a strip of skin exposed to her waist. The skirt simply clung, leaving no doubt that it lay next to her skin.

To his surprise, Ted discovered that the other two women were as extremely dressed. He resigned himself to this one more night of trading.

Over their after-dinner coffee, Elsie proposed a toast. "Coffee's not the best thing to drink toasts with," she admitted. "But let's drink to a hell of a fine education!"

Ted glanced at Rita in time to catch the sudden quirk of her mouth. Evidently she felt that she could drink to that.

"And then," Elsie continued, "let's admit that mate-swapping's too damn dangerous with teen-age kids around."

Ted squirmed. Elsie sounded brittle and unnatural.

There was something phony as hell in what she was doing and saying.

Rita spoke up. "I don't give a damn about the teen-age kids. I'm just plain torn apart every time I see Ted making love to anyone but me!"

Elsie shot a startled look at Rita. Her lip quivered. "I … That's how I feel, too!" Her voice rose to a wail. "Oh-h-h! I feel so old-fashioned!"

Bill put his arm around her shoulder and let her lean against him. "I'm afraid I'm just as bad," he said. "I'm not nearly as liberal-minded as I thought I was."

Cora and Al exchanged glances. “What a bunch of goddamn squares!” muttered Cora. Then she grinned. “I guess I’ll have to be satisfied with you, Al.”

“You mink!” he said. “You found out it didn’t feel a hell of a lot different, no matter who was behind it, didn’t you?”

She nodded. “You push it just as good as any of the rest of ‘em, honey.” She sighed.

“Let’s go into the living room,” suggested Elsie.

When they’d found comfortable spots, she said, “I did want to have one last orgy, just to sort of put the icing on. Would it be too awful if Bill made love to me right now?”

“Here?!” asked Bill.

Elsie stared into his eyes and nodded silently.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Cora said. “Come here, baby!” She pressed against Al.

“Wait a minute!” Elsie sprang to her feet. “We’re not going to spoil it by being selfish! On your feet, Cora and Rita!”

“Now!” Cora unfastened the shoulder straps of her dress and let it slide slowly to the floor. She stood naked in the soft light and waited.

Cora giggled and bent to catch hold of the hem of her sheath. She tugged it up and peeled it off over her head, to join Elsie in her nudity.

Rita smiled at Ted and unclasped the top of her dress at the back of her neck. She let go and the panels slid off her breasts and let the skirt slither to the floor.

“Now, darling,” she whispered to him. “Now!”

Ted reached up to cup his hand over her breast. Her skin felt cool and dry to his touch. He sniffed at her fragrance, conscious of it for the first time that evening, as if only the shedding of her dress had released it. He squeezed and Rita laid her cheek on the top of his head.

"I'm going to like this!" she murmured.

"A couple of hours?" he asked.

"At least!"

"I guess so. We're celebrating, aren't we?" He sucked her nipple between his lips.

Rita held his head between her hands, her fingers caressing the sides of his neck and leaned toward him.

"Honey?" she said.

"Mmm?" He liked it when her voice was soft and intimate like that.

"Get undressed, honey. Please?"

Ted released her breast from his mouth and sighed. He wished he'd worn as little as the women had.

"That's it, Ted!" exclaimed Cora as his shirt came off. "Come on, Al. You too. I don't want to waste time later."

Al grinned at Ted and started to follow his example.

Bill watched them for a moment, then disengaged himself from Elsie and stood up.

"Hm?" said Elsie. "Hm? Where are you going?" he looked round her with a dazed expression. "Bill?"

"Just getting undressed, baby."

"But … but there …" She hugged herself and shrank against the back of the couch. Then she laughed and sat up. "God! I'm regressing! I got all wrapped up in what Bill was doing to me and forgot the rest of you. When he stopped and I saw there was a second when I forgot about all that's happened. Remember the dreams when you were out in a crowd, naked? Br-r-r!"

"You wouldn't have forgotten yourself a few weeks ago," Al commented. "No matter what Bill was doing to you."

Elsie studied him thoughtfully, then turned to look at Ted. She began to smile. "No. That's true. I'd have been poised and alert." She gave an exaggerated imitation of the composed dignity that was her most memorable characteristic.

"I like you that way, too," Ted offered. "I'd hate to see anything happen to that dignity. But I will say you're better without it when it comes to sex."

Bill grunted. "Damn sight hotter, too."

Elsie shivered and rubbed at her gooseflesh. "Bill! You've got to stop talking like that!"

Ted stretched. Maybe he was an exhibitionist. He enjoyed being naked with these friends and he was going to have fun making love to Rita in this room with them. He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. She reached out to grasp the shaft of his penis in her hand.

"Careful, doll!" he warned her. "That thing's loaded!"

She squeezed. "Then stop standing there dreaming and do something about it! No one's going to be helping you to keep me satisfied, now, you know."

"You're damn right I know!" He dropped beside her and scooped her to him. Damn right he

knew. And that was the way he wanted it!